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Towards a Clearer Biblical Understanding of Election

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*All Biblical citations throughout this thesis come from the New American Standard Bible. All Greek Biblical Citations from the Nestle-Aland: Novum Testamentum Graece.

Blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

Ephesians 1:3-6

Conscience knows nothing about causality. It does not accept determinism. It believes in the fallacy of the free will. It does not acknowledge the obvious fact that my action was the unavoidable result of my character, shaped by my whole past life, and the only response which I, as a unique personality, could give to external stimulants. Conscience attributes to me alone the guilt of an action which was the end result of the influence of thousands of other people: ancestors who transmitted to me a certain heredity; teachers and parents who gave me a faulty education; authors, actors, friends, and enemies who molded my soul; the pressure of my social environment; and so on.

Conscience knows nothing about God's plans in which my sinful act may have played a necessary role- "Against thy holy child Jesus, who thou hast anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate with the Gentiles and the people of Israel were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before had to be done."

Richard Wurmbrand (27)

This thesis is dedicated to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,
without whom I would be lost forever, dead in my sins, and without hope; but through
whom I have been given life eternal, life abundant, and hope.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The question of the nature of the Biblical doctrine of election has continually plagued theologians. Over the course of time the answer to this question has evolved into two fundamentally divergent theologies known as Calvinism and Arminianism. These theologies have caused a wide gap among Christian churches. Despite an obvious need for general unity amongst the Christian body, this debate has often left bitterness, anger, and separation within the Church. With every side of the debate claiming to hold the most sound and proper Biblical reading, there has been little room for reconciliation between the competing schools of thought debating over election. It is my hope that revisiting the debate over election will not serve to further alienate believers from one another. My hope is that a better understanding of the theological differences that separate us will aid in bridging the gap that currently exists within the body of Christ.

In examining the doctrine of election, I will explore two questions in detail with the hope that they will shed light on the doctrine of election in general. First, is humanity free to choose to have faith in Jesus Christ of his own will, or is humanity utterly depraved of the ability to freely choose faith in Christ because of his bondage to the chains of sin? Second, is predestination conditionally based upon foreseen faith, or unconditionally granted and based solely upon the sovereign choice of God?

In seeking answers to these questions, I do not hope or aspire to end the discussion of election once for all. Not only would this be impossible, it would be impractical. If this were to occur, an entire reworking of the Christian Church would be in order. Obviously, this will not occur as the result of my thesis. Instead, my desire is to

speak to those Christians who have an interest in the issues surrounding the Biblical view of election. I desire for the reader of this thesis to have a clearer understanding of the debate that surrounds election and greater insight into the Biblical texts describing election. I also desire to speak to leaders of churches today who see this issue as one that ought not to be addressed in their churches because of the divisions in the body that it has created in the past. Such practices are not only impractical, they are done in vain.

Whether verbalized or not, every church teaches the salvation of Christ in the way that it believes in the doctrine of election. For this reason, it is my belief that tabling this debate in order to avoid conflict only serves to increase ignorance of God's plan for salvation, increase fears that the more difficult issues in the Bible cannot be properly understood, and relegate a very important doctrinal principle regarding the sovereignty of God to a point where it may no longer be discussed.

The doctrine of election very greatly shapes our understanding of God's role in the world in which we live. How we view election aids in our understanding of how Christians come to faith in Jesus Christ. It even affects how a person prays to God. Our understanding of election may cause us to live in great fear of the wrath of God or cause us to live lives full of great peace in full assurance of faith.

I will examine free will and conditional election in the following manner. Chapters two and three shall serve as introductions to the main theological beliefs that each side of the debate over election has maintained. Chapter two shall introduce the arguments for total depravity and unconditional election and some of the main implications for these beliefs, while chapter three shall discuss the prevailing counter

arguments which include a belief in free will and election which is conditioned upon faith, as well as the main implications for this set of beliefs.

It may be noted that these chapters develop along similar theological lines as are sometimes referred to today as Calvinism and Arminianism. Calvinism and Arminianism are inextricably tied to the writings of John Calvin and Jacob Arminius. Over time, however, these terms have come to mean other things than simply the broad general theology of either of these men. Because both of these men wrote about areas of theology much broader than the scope of discussion advanced within this paper and because much of what I write does not line up with what either of those men may have believed, I believe that it would be counterproductive to tie this thesis directly to either of their theologies. My aim in writing these two introductory chapters has been to compare theology, not theologians. Therefore, chapters two and three ought not be read as comparing the distinct theological teachings of John Calvin with Jacob Arminius, but rather as an attempt to come to a general understanding of some of the doctrines that we refer to today by their names.

Since the 1500's and 1600's Calvinism and Arminianism have been reworked around a number of different doctrines. These doctrines have concerned such issues as supra-lapsarianism and post-lapsarianism, the foreknowledge of God, the meaning of original sin, et cetera. I have not attempted in the introduction to these two theologies to consider all of the branches that have taken place within this debate. Instead, my desire has been to consider these two competing theologies at fundamental levels and consider what issues lie at the heart of the divisions between them.

Chapter four consists of the Scriptural texts that I believe offer the greatest points of contention concerning election and my thoughts concerning these verses, especially how these verses ought to be read both individually and collectively and what they to say concerning election. Chapter five concludes by offering the implications upon this debate that this thesis has reached and offers the practical applications for the Church and for daily Christian living that the doctrine of election ought to have.

A Note on the Rise of Historical Calvinism and Arminianism

It is helpful to have a general understanding historically of how we have arrived at the point theologically in which we currently find ourselves. In general, the unconditional election of individuals has come to be known as Calvinism. Calvinists believe that God has elected unconditionally who will be saved and called them forth to a life of faith in Jesus Christ. This doctrine traces its roots historically to Saint Augustine, but takes its name from the Reformation age pastor and theologian, John Calvin.

Calvin published his most famous work, *The Institutes*, at the age of twenty-seven. *The Institutes* is Calvin's systematic theology and, therefore, covers a great number of topics other than just election. In fact, election is found near the end of *The Institutes* and represents a fairly small portion of his collective theology. Despite this, the doctrine of unconditional election historically became known as "Calvinism" due predominantly to the fact that as theologians defended unconditional election against the attacks of Arminius and others, Calvin's *Institutes* was often used as a foundational treatise on election.

Arminianism, as generally held today, presupposes a belief in the conditional election of humanity and the belief in the idea of the free will of humanity to either

choose to reject Jesus as Lord. It should be noted that Jacob Arminius himself did not believe in free will in the same way that it will be discussed in this essay. Arminius believed that prevenient grace was necessary for a person to become a believer. Those to whom God did not give this grace were not able to come into a saving faith in Jesus Christ. Arminius writes:

In his lapsed and sinful state, man is not capable, of and by himself, either to think, to will, or to do that which is really good; but it is necessary for him to be regenerated and renewed in his intellect, affections or will, and in all his powers, by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, that he may be qualified rightly to understand, esteem, consider, will, and perform whatever is truly good. When he is made a partaker of this regeneration or renovation, I consider that, since he is delivered from sin, he is capable of thinking, willing and doing that which is good, but yet not without the continued aids of Divine Grace (Arminius 227-228).

Arminius lived about one hundred years after John Calvin and was trained in traditional Calvinist theology. When called upon to debate Dirk Koornhert and defend the super-Calvinist doctrine of supralapsarianism, Arminius decided during his preparation for this debate that he did not agree that the Bible taught such a strict unconditional view of election. Arminius began to teach that election was conditional upon faith. Eventually, Arminius's followers wrote up a statement that they felt described election best. They titled this statement *The Articles of Remonstrance*. These five statements immediately became very hotly debated among both theological and political circles and eventually spurred those who believed in unconditional election to call the Synod of Dort. The Synod of Dort responded to each statement of *The Articles of Remonstrance* with what

they believed to be the correct view of election. Their response came to be known as the *Canon of Dort*. This response has come to be considered one of the primary documents outlining the Calvinist view of election.

Presuppositions within this thesis

I have made a number of assumptions in writing this paper. Because thoughts concerning election and both Calvinism and Arminianism involve so many varied opinions, it has been necessary to sift out certain ones from the beginning. In this paper, all of the authors (at least at the time that they were writing the material I quote) believed in God's foreknowledge of the future. There does exist a camp within Arminianism that rejects God's absolute foreknowledge, however I have felt that the discussion of foreknowledge was outside the scope of this paper. Therefore, in all that I write there is an assumption that God knows all that will come to pass before it occurs. Jack Cottrell explains God's foreknowledge like this:

One of the basic truths of Scripture is that God is eternal. This means two things. One, it means that when time is considered as a linear succession of moments with a before and a now and an after, God is infinite in both directions. He has existed before now into infinite time past without ever having begun, and he will exist after now into infinite future time without ever ending. That God is eternal means that he is not bound by the restrictions of time; he is above time. At any given moment, what is both past and future to a finite creature is present to God's knowledge. It is all now to God, in a kind of panorama of time; he is the great "I AM" (Pinnock 59).

Beyond this theological supposition, I have also assumed that the Bible offers the only objective source to answer our questions about the ways and means that God has employed in election. I believe the Bible is the Word of God, fully inspired and without error in the original manuscripts, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and that it has supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct. It will be noted throughout this paper that certain verses have been allowed to stand on their own. While this is based on the notion that each verse is equally the inspired word of God, it does not mean that I have failed to recognize that every verse is written within a context. This context consists of multiple levels of meaning which involve historical, textual, geographical, and cultural factors. These facts, however, do not diminish the importance of the Bible as a living tool of God that is still fully alive and useful today.

I believe that the Bible presents a unified portrait of how God interacts with this world with different parts adding depth and clarity to other sections of the Bible. When different parts of the Bible appear to be in conflict, I believe we are to find out how they ultimately fit together. Take for example, Romans 4:5 and James 2:24. These verses appear to be at odds with one another on an initial reading. However, upon a deeper reading of these verses, I believe that it is clear that these verses do not contradict one another. This is because both James and Paul give the reader a context in which the other may be understood. Each author had different goals and different audiences when he wrote what he did. By examining their goals and their audience, I believe that we are able to come to a more complete understanding of what God is revealing through these verses. In a similar manner, there are verses in the Bible involving the doctrine of election that appear at odds with one another at first. This does not mean, however, that the Bible

teaches different doctrines of theology. I believe that it up to the reader to seek and understand how the varying parts make up the whole. By examining the verses that speak most clearly about election and examining each verse individually within its context and collectively in light of the others, it is my hope to develop a clearer picture of what the Bible teaches of the doctrine of election.

Chapter 2: Total Depravity and Conditional Election

This chapter will outline the doctrines of total depravity and unconditional election and their implications upon the rest of theology. I will build the general case for humanity's inability to come to God apart from a grace given by God that opens up people's eyes to the gospel and for the necessity of election being unconditional. The views that I will present are not meant to represent any particular theologian, but simply are meant to exemplify the Biblical argument for these doctrines. In cases where other theologians' words explained the doctrinal positions more clearly than I felt I could, I have used their words. However, emphasis has primarily been placed upon Bible verses in order to allow the Bible to speak for the theologians wherever possible.

The key to understanding the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election is to first understand to how great an extent Calvinists believe humanity is gripped by the sinful nature. This doctrine is often referred to as total depravity.

Total Depravity

Total depravity is the teaching that because humanity is utterly sinful from birth, all of mankind is born in complete defiance to God and lives in that nature until God calls a person to faith in Christ. Due to Adam's original sin, all of humanity has fallen into slavery to sin and justly deserves eternal punishment by God in hell. The *Canon of Dort* defines humanity's sinful nature in this way:

Therefore, all people are conceived in sin and are born children of wrath, unfit for any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin; without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they are neither willing nor able to return to

God, to reform their distorted nature, or even to dispose themselves to such reform (Sect. 3, Art. 3).

There are two main points that are key to understanding the total depravity of humanity. First, all of humanity is utterly sinful from birth. This includes every man, woman, or child on earth who has existed from the fall of Adam to the present. Second, total depravity teaches that humanity is unable to choose by his own accord to come to faith in God.

Total depravity may be understood in the following way. The first tenant of total depravity is that all of mankind has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. As it is written, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). As the Psalter says:

There is no one who does good. The Lord has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is not one who does good, not even one" (Psalm 14:1b-3).

Second, because the standard upon which we are judged for our sin is the absolute perfection and holiness of God, the only proper punishment for our unrighteousness is death. "For the wages of sin is death," (Rom. 6:23). Anything less than death would be to bring down the glory of God. If God did not punish our sin with death, God would have to lower himself to our sinful standards. Romans 3:23 demonstrates that the standard by which we must be judged is the glory of God. The glory of God, therefore, is the standard we must live up to if we are to be deemed righteous before God. Because no person

compares to the glory of God, all equally deserve eternal punishment apart from the glory of God.

Third, total depravity teaches that all activities a person does apart from faith in God are sinful. For example: helping the poor, feeding the hungry, and housing the homeless are all sinful acts if they are not done in order to glorify God out of faith in Jesus. The Scriptural mandate for this teaching is found in Hebrews 11:6, "And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." Likewise, Romans 14:23 says, "and whatever is not from faith is sin." Because the standard is the perfection of God, the only thing that can please God is to rely on Him through faith. As Paul writes in Romans 4:20 that faith gives glory to God, "yet, with respect to the promise of God, he (Abraham) did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God." The significance of this statement is that, as far as God is concerned, all of our actions, if not wrought by Him and done in faith, only end up justifying God's right to judge every person on earth.

Fourth, total depravity teaches that mankind is not able to submit to God by his own volition. This is the main point in understanding the doctrine of total depravity. Because we are unable to come to faith in God by our own ability, the only possible way that anyone might be saved is by their election by God. God alone must freely elect all those who are to be saved. The Scriptural mandate for this doctrine is found in Romans 8:6-8:

For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not

subject itself to the law of God, *for it is not even able to do so*; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (italics added).

This verse clearly shows that the mind of the person set on the flesh, i.e. those who have not turned to faith in Christ, are not able to do so of their own ability. Total depravity argues that humanity is simply unable to set itself towards the Spirit apart from the electing grace of God.

Calvinists cite verses that metaphorically speak of our sinful nature as indicating the same principle. They argue that verses saying we are slaves to sin (Romans 6:17) and that we are dead in our old nature (Ephesians 2:5) indicate mankind’s inability to act alone, apart from election by God. Calvinists argue that just as a slave cannot free himself and that a corpse cannot come alive on its own, mankind also cannot break the chains of sin apart from God’s aid and provision through individual election.

The contention that humanity may not freely choose God of his own volition has vast implications. First, it highlights how utterly sinful is the heart of humanity by arguing that humanity will always choose evil if God does not intervene to change the person’s heart. Second, it makes certain that apart from election by God, no person would ever be saved. This means that humanity lacks the free ability to choose God. For a Calvinist the chance for salvation is not an equal sum endeavor where a person may be offered a choice between Christ and the world and has an equal chance to choose either. Instead, Calvinists believe that given the choice between faith in Christ or a life lived for the world a person who is not among the elect will always choose the world, thereby justifying God’s eternal wrath, and incurring eternal damnation upon themselves. Third, when coupled with the fact that everything a person does apart from faith is sinful, it

means that the only way God could choose those whom he will save is by unconditional election.

Unconditional Election

Calvinism teaches that God has elected those who will turn to Him and believe in Him. Election is based upon nothing other than God's sovereign, immutable will. This means that God does not choose who will believe based on anything that a person has done or by any special characteristic that a person may possess. Indeed, because of the teaching of total depravity where all of mankind is equally yoked by the slavery of sin and utterly reprehensible in the sight of God, it would be impossible for God to choose based on any such designation of worthiness. If God did choose the elect in this manner, all of humanity would be damned for eternity. Calvin writes, "We assert that, with respect to the elect, this plan was founded upon his freely given mercy, without regard to human worth" (Calvin Chap. XXI, Sect. 7). Furthermore, Calvinists argue that God does not choose the elect through foreseen faith, but only by His own free choice. The Canon of Dort describes election in this way:

This same election took place, not on the basis of foreseen faith, of the obedience of faith, of holiness, or of any other good quality and disposition, as though it were based on a prerequisite cause or condition in the person to be chosen, but rather for the purpose of faith, or the obedience of faith, of holiness, and so on. Accordingly, election is the source of each of the benefits of salvation. Faith, holiness, and the other saving gifts, and at last eternal life itself, flow forth from election as its fruits and effects (Sect. 1, Art. 9).

This statement represents a fundamental distinction between Calvinists and Arminians. Calvinists argue that election precedes foreknown faith. Indeed, without election, no person would choose God and come to faith. For the Calvinist, it is only possible to come to a saving faith if you are among the elect.

Calvinists emphasize the following verses when discussing the doctrine of unconditional election. In Acts 13:48, the gospel is preached to the Gentiles in Antioch and it is reported that "as many as were ordained to eternal life believed." For a Calvinist, the order of events in this passage is crucial. It is argued that only those who had been ordained to eternal life believed and, therefore, those who believed had previously been ordained to eternal life. The Calvinist notes that the passage does not declare that all those who believed were then ordained for eternal life. Had this been the case the passage might have read, "and all those who believed were ordained to eternal life."

Similarly, in John 10:26 Jesus declares, "But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep." Calvinists believe that Jesus declares through this statement that you must be among those chosen or elected by God in order to believe. The reason the crowds did not believe was that they had not been elected to belief. They were among those who existed in their original sinful nature, slaves to sin, dead in their transgressions, and not previously chosen by God to have faith. Calvin, cites II Tim. 1:9 as a key verse emphasizing this point (Calvin Chap. XXII, Sect. 3). Paul writes, "for God 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 Christ Jesus from all eternity."

Romans 9:11-13 is often cited by Calvinists as a primary Biblical source emphasizing the doctrine of unconditional election. It reads:

[F]or though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

Calvinists maintain that these verses tie election to the sovereignty of God's choice rather than the merit of man's actions. In *The Institutes*, John Calvin writes extensively on these verses. Calvin emphasizes the fact that Paul states the decision had been made before the brothers had been born. To Calvin this rules out the possibility that the choice were made by anything other than God's sovereign will in election. "We have, as it were, an example of this thing set before us. Esau and Jacob are brothers, born of the same parents, as yet enclosed in the same womb, not yet come forth in to the light. In them all things are equal, yet God's judgement of each is different. For he receives one and rejects the other" (Calvin Chap. XXII, Sect. 4).

The question is often asked, why does God choose some to salvation and others elected or passed over to damnation? Calvinists say that this question ought not be asked. When a person searches for a reason for the election of some to faith and the passing over of others, this person searches in vain and possibly even to his detriment. Constantly, throughout his discussion of election within *The Institutes*, Calvin notes that when one pursues questions that are beyond the scope of the text of the Bible and probe within the very mind of God, that person treads upon ground that ought not be tread.

When, therefore, one asks why God has so done, we must reply: because he has willed it. But if you proceed further to ask why he so willed, you are seeking something greater and higher than God's will, which cannot be found. Let men's

rashness, then restrain itself, and not seek what does not exist, lest perhaps it fail to find what does exist (Calvin Chap. XXIII, Sect. 2).

What are the implications of total depravity and unconditional election upon the crucifixion of Christ? Often the cross of Christ is taught in churches today as giving all of humanity the opportunity to be saved if they will only believe in the blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. However, if not all people can be saved because God only gives the grace to believe to some people what does this have to say about the redeeming work of Christ?

Limited Atonement

What is the nature of the crucifixion of Christ? Did the death of Christ serve simply to enable all of humanity to be saved by providing for them the forgiveness of sins required by the just nature of God if they come to faith in Christ of their own volition, or did the death of Jesus Christ actually purchase the faith that is required for salvation? Calvinists often describe the work of the cross under the title, limited atonement. Limited atonement means that Jesus' death not only provides the means by which a sinner who comes to faith might be saved, but it actually provides the impetus that propels a sinner to come to faith. While most Calvinists would argue that Christ's death could have the ability to save all sinners should they come to faith, the greater purpose behind the crucifixion was to die in a purposeful saving manner for the sake of the elect. To die for the elect in a special way means that Christ's death was for the specific purpose of bringing together those elect who have been scattered around the world.

Calvinist's cite verses that indicate that while Christ's death has the ability to save all people in the world, its effectual working only affects those whom God has already chosen. John 11:51-52 states:

Now this he [Caiaphas] did not say on his own initiative; but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

The Calvinist reads these verses to mean that Christ's death served as the means by which God would gather all of his elect together into one body. The purpose of the crucifixion, therefore, is more than simply allowing faith to have a saving ability, but it actually serves to cause that faith to occur.

Another key verse that Calvinists cite is Revelation 5:9 which reads, "And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.'" Calvinists put great emphasis on the word "purchase" within this verse arguing that it was by the crucifixion of Christ that the elect were actually purchased by God for life. Many other verses make similar statements (2 Peter 2:1, Hebrews 10:14).

So far we have seen that all men are equally yoked by the chains of the sinful nature unable to come to God of their own, that God chooses those who will come to faith without any preconceived conditions on the part of the elect, and that Christ's death purchases the means by which the elect might be saved. Next, we learn about the manner by which the elect come to the faith. The Calvinist calls this irresistible grace.

Irresistible Grace

Irresistible grace is the influence of the Holy Spirit to draw the elect to God. The Calvinist argues that if the grace of God were not irresistible all of humanity would be lost forever in their sins and unable to come to a saving faith in Christ because they would forever choose to turn away from God.

The doctrine of irresistible grace is built upon the doctrine of total depravity. If a person is unable to come to God of his own volition the only hope for anyone to be saved is supernatural intercession. Because the Bible clearly teaches that some people are to be saved, the Calvinist infers that God must exert an influence over those who are of the elect to cause them to turn to God for the forgiveness of their sins. In this case, grace is not merely an offering to all people of forgiveness through faith in the cross, but the actual effective saving of some and not others by God the Father through the death of Jesus His Son.

Calvinists look at verses such as John 6:44 where Jesus says, "No one can come to Me, unless the Father draws him; and I will raise him upon the last day." The implication here is that God does not call all people to a saving faith in Jesus. The only people who are to be raised up on the last day are those whom the Father has drawn to Christ. All others are lost forever due to their state of depravity and their bondage to the sinful nature.

For the Calvinist, irresistible grace does not mean that humanity is unable to resist God's will. Indeed, for the Calvinist the story of the Old Testament repeatedly stresses that the people of Israel turned their backs to the will of God (TULIP, Bethlehem Baptist, 9). Rather, irresistible grace means that when God has chosen a person to be among the

elect the power exerted by the Holy Spirit is unable to be resisted. In this way, grace is irresistible because it effectively accomplishes the goal for which it was given, namely salvation of the lost sinner.

The doctrine of irresistible grace has tremendous implications. The notion that grace is irresistible means that grace has not been offered to all, because if grace were irresistibly offered to all, then all persons would be saved. Instead, grace, at least effectual saving grace, has only been offered to the elect. All others have been passed over. This represents one of the crucial distinctions between those who believe in total depravity and those who believe in free will. While those who believe in free will stress that all people have the potential to be saved by faith through grace given by the death of Christ, those who believe we are totally depraved argue that grace is only given to the elect. [Note: this does not mean that Calvinism denies a type of common grace given to all people. Calvinism teaches that all people have access to a common grace (eg. the rising of the sun, the chance to live another day, food and water, etc.), but that this grace is not enough to overcome the depravity of mankind.]

Once a person has been called by irresistible grace into a saving faith in Jesus Christ, Calvinism teaches that this grace is effective to enable a person to remain in saving faith until their death. This is known as the perseverance of the saints.

Perseverance of the Saints

The perseverance of the saints is built on the belief that all those whom God has elected to salvation, he has also called to remain in the faith until the end. As Mark 13:13 states, "But he who endures to the end will be saved." Perseverance of the saints is God's promise to those whom he has chosen that He will give them the strength and the ability

to stand strong in faith until the end. Perseverance is also built upon the notion of total depravity. Were God not able to keep those whom He has brought to faith, certainly all would turn away from Him once He removed His staying hand.

Perseverance of the saints does not deny the need of the saints to continue on in their faith until the end. Rather, it teaches that all the saints must continue to believe and live faithful and obedient lives in Christ. In this way, it is very different from the teaching often referred to as “once saved, always saved.” “Once saved, always saved” generally teaches that once a person has made a sincere confession of faith at some point in their lives, they will be saved in the end regardless of what happens during the remainder of their lives. This teaching greatly contradicts many passages of Scripture that declare that we must persevere in the faith. As Jesus says in John 8:31, “If you abide in my word, then you are truly disciples of Mine.” Truly, in order to be a disciple of Christ, a person must continue to walk in the faith that they professed until the end.

Perseverance of the saints teaches that all those who are of true faith and among the elect will not and cannot be lost. As Jesus says in John 10:26-30:

But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice and I know them and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one.

These verses demonstrate that all people who are among Christ's sheep will be given the grace to continue on in their faith.

Perseverance of the saints does not mean that all who make a verbal confession of faith at some point in their lives will be saved. Those people who confess to have faith in Christ, but then turn away prove that they were never among the elect and that their faith was never genuine. As the parable of the seed and the sower demonstrates as found in Luke 8:4-21 some seed begins to grow and seems to have the characteristics of a saving faith demonstrating proof of election, but as the plant grows often it is choked by the thorns or withered due to lack of moisture. Of these plants Jesus says in Luke 8:13-14:

And those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away. And the seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity.

Clearly, people exist who at some point in their lives believe in Jesus as their Savior, but later fall away showing that they were never among the truly elect.

The crucial point concerning the perseverance of the saints is that God causes those whom he has chosen to remain steadfast in the faith until the end. This is the reason for the hope that so often springs from the doctrine of perseverance. As 1 Corinthians 1:8-9 says, "(Jesus Christ) shall also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord," Likewise, I Thessalonians 5:23-24 reads:

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.

In these verses Calvinists derive the assurance that the faith that God has given He will also allow to endure to the end for all those who are among the elect.

Conclusion

In this summary of the general Calvinistic approach to election, I have emphasized the two main doctrines of total depravity and unconditional election. Calvinists teach that because of our sinful nature humanity lacks the free will ability to choose to have faith in God. In order for a person to come to faith in God, that person must be among the elect. God has chosen the elect by the choice of His sovereign immutable will apart from any goodness or faith that He has foreseen in anyone. These doctrines affect the way a person views the salvific work of the cross, the way a person understands the pouring out of grace upon the world, and the assurance that a person has that they have been truly called by God.

Chapter 3: Free Will and Conditional Election

In this chapter I will expound upon the primary theological arguments contrary to the doctrines of total depravity and unconditional election. Often today, these arguments are grouped under the general heading of Arminianism. However, as my introduction alluded, there exists a great variety of thought within the Arminian branch of theology. Indeed, Jacob Arminius himself agreed with the concept of total depravity, holding that it was only possible to come to a saving faith in Christ by a special grace given by God. The term Arminian in this essay shall refer to those who hold to the principle of free will and the doctrine of conditional election.

One of the foremost differences between Calvinism and Arminianism lies in their understanding of the effects of the sinfulness of humanity. While Calvinists hold that humanity is depraved to the point that humanity is absolutely unable to choose to have faith in God, Arminianism holds that humanity has been given the free will to choose between good and evil.

Free Will

The foundational assumption behind Arminian theology today is a belief in the free will of humanity. As Clark Pinnock writes:

One of the deepest of all human intuitions...is the sense of freedom to determine what they shall do and what they shall be. Universal man almost without exception talks and feels *as if* he were free. He perceives himself to be a person capable of rising above his situation, of shaping his life and destiny, and of making a significant impact upon history (Pinnock 95).

Arminians believe that humanity has been given the freedom by God to choose between good (following God) and evil (following after the world). This theological difference between the Calvinist and the Arminian exists mainly because of their different ways of understanding the nature of sin in our lives. While a Calvinist believes that the Bible teaches that sin may actually enslave humanity, the Arminian believes that the Bible only teaches that sin is part of our nature and gives God the just authority to judge all of humanity. It does not actually put a hold upon our decision making abilities. Jack Cottrell writes:

The fact is, however, that the Bible does not picture man as totally depraved. Man as a sinner is truly depraved and corrupted (Jer. 17:9), even to the point of being dead in his trespasses and sins. This does not mean, however, that he is unable to respond to the gospel call... Thus a person cannot come to faith without the gospel, but he is able to respond to the gospel in faith (Pinnock 68).

An Arminian will quickly point out the virtually limitless number of verses in the Bible that seem to indicate our ability to choose between right and wrong. In Joshua 24:22, after Joshua has finished asking the people whom they will serve, he says, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen for yourselves the Lord, to serve Him." Pinnock describes the Bible's testimony to the freedom of the will in this way:

When we turn to the Bible, this natural conviction about human freedom is confirmed and strengthened. Man is viewed in Scripture as a responsible agent, created in the likeness of God, who must account morally to his Maker for the way in which he acts and for the decisions which he makes. What stands out in the biblical narrative is not what we might term a "blueprint" model of the

universe in which everything is already decided, so that individual enterprises are smothered underneath an exhaustive divine decree. What stands out rather is the strongly personal character of God and his dealings with mankind (Pinnock 96-97).

The doctrine of free will yields immense implications upon the rest of election theology. If humanity lacks the ability to trust in God of their own free ability as the Calvinist argues, then the only manner in which any person may be saved, is through their election by God. Assuming that there are to be some people damned to hell, as both Calvinists and Arminians agree, the Calvinist must argue that God has determined that some people have no hope of salvation because they were never chosen for salvation through divine election. For the Arminian, however, this problem does not exist. For the Arminian, everyone has the equal opportunity to be saved, if they will only choose to believe in Jesus. Because humanity has no unbreakable bondage to sin, everyone who hears the gospel has a choice to either submit to God for the salvation of their souls or to deny God to the eternal detriment of their souls. In this manner, God has chosen everyone equally to have a chance for salvation. Ultimate responsibility for salvation, therefore, lies in the hands of humanity, not the eternal decree of God.

The responsibility of humanity versus the justice and love of God represents the major issue at stake for the Arminian. If we as humans are unable to choose anything but evil from birth, then we cannot be held responsible for our actions. This is one of the major criticisms for Calvinism. Arminians ask how a just God can damn to hell for eternity persons who have never had the opportunity to choose to turn to God. It is as though certain people were only created for damnation. This hardly seems the manner in

which a just God would act. Arminians hold that this stance is untenable with a God who loves his creation and made mankind in his own image.

In order for God to remain a just God and for humanity to have freedom, Arminians conclude that election must be conditional.

Conditional Election

Arminians believe that our election to salvation is conditional upon our heart's response to the gospel message through faith in Jesus Christ. If we receive the message and humbly submit to the rule of Jesus over our lives, resulting in faith, we will be saved. Salvation is contingent upon our faith. Only those who have faith in Jesus Christ will be saved. It is important to note that Calvinists agree with this supposition. Both Calvinists and Arminians believe that faith is necessary for a person to be saved. The true difference between a Calvinist and an Arminian is that while a Calvinist believes that election precedes faith, Arminians believe that faith is what causes us to actually be among the elect. In this manner God has conditioned election of the saints upon faith.

Arminianism holds that God elects people based on faith that is foreseen before the beginning of time. This means that God has elected a group of people for salvation, not individuals. God has elected all those who have faith in Christ. This stance draws heavily upon the ordering of the phrases contained in Romans 8:29 which reads, "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined." Arminianism reads this verse to mean that God knew before the creation of the world who would and who would not respond in faith to the gospel message. Based on this knowledge, God has "predestined" all those whom he foreknew would have faith to be his elect. Cottrell explains this doctrine like this:

How is it possible that God could determine even before the creation which individuals will be saved, and could even write their names in the book of life? The answer is found in the fact and nature of God's foreknowledge. The Bible explicitly relates predestination to God's foreknowledge, and a correct understanding of this relationship is the key to the whole question of salvation (Pinnock 58).

If God conditionally elects those who have faith in Christ what does that mean for the crucifixion of Christ?

Atonement Made Available through Christ

Arminians believe that the cross is the means by which God made it possible for all men to be saved. Arminians believe that Christ died on the cross in order to satisfy the just requirements of God for sinful man. Because all of humanity has fallen short of the glory of God, the only way for any person to enter into the glory of God is through a perfect sacrifice. Jesus Christ was this perfect sacrifice. As John the Baptist states in John 1:29, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Arminians believe that Jesus paid this price for all time and for all people. However, this does not mean that through the death of Jesus all of humanity is to be saved. Arminians believe that because of conditional election, only those who have faith in Christ are appropriated the forgiveness of sins made possible by Jesus' death.

Scriptural support for this is found in verses like 1 John 2:2 which reads, "and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." Arminians believe that when John refers to the "whole world," he is speaking of everyone who is living on this earth, not simply those who are of faith.

Therefore, Arminians hold that the death of Christ makes it possible for all of humanity to be saved.

This stance is often described as potentially universal. Potential universality means that God has not limited the number of people who may be saved by faith in Jesus. It is possible that all men may be saved, as long as they choose to turn to the cross of Christ for the forgiveness of their sins.

Resistible Grace

For the Calvinist grace is an active mechanism of God by which the elect irresistibly drawn out of their bondage to sin. Without this active pull, Calvinists teach that no one would be saved. For the Calvinist, therefore, grace is the mechanism God uses to draw forth an active and living faith. For the Arminian grace is more of a passive reality. Arminians believe that grace does not cause a person to have faith any more than the death of Christ causes someone to have faith. If grace did irresistibly cause someone to have faith, faith would no longer be a product of free choice and would, therefore, violate the free will of humanity. Instead, grace is the gift of God bought by the death of Christ. Grace represents the mechanism by which all people might be saved if they choose to have faith in Jesus Christ. It is due to this fact that grace is potentially universal. Vernon Grounds explains grace in this way:

It [grace] is the omnipotent help which God in His freedom chooses to give through Jesus Christ and by his Spirit, liberating man from his self-incurred bondage and misery, reestablishing a right relationship with himself (Pinnock 23).

Grace represents the very enabling of the Lord for all of humanity to come into a right relationship with God. This enabling is made possible by the death of Jesus on the cross

and made effective by faith in Jesus Christ. In this way, the only limiting factor on the grace given by God through Jesus Christ is our response to it. If we respond favorably through faith, grace is given to us in a saving manner, however, if we reject the grace of God given through Christ we give ourselves over to God's righteous judgment and eternal damnation. Grounds writes:

The universality of grace, it must be made clear, does not mean universalism! It means merely that God is at work in Jesus Christ and by his Holy Spirit sovereignly and sincerely providing the potential of salvation for every human being. But that potential depends for its actualization on a believing response (Pinnock 28).

If grace may be freely chosen, then it stands to reason that grace may also, once accepted, be rejected.

Potential Loss of Salvation

Just as Calvinism begins and ends with the unconditional choice of God in election, Arminianism begins and ends with the free choice of man to have faith in Christ or to deny Christ. Arminians do not believe that this choice ends once a person decides to have faith in Christ. Therefore, while a Calvinist believes that God cannot and will not lose those who are among the truly elect, Arminians believe that it remains up to each individual person to persevere in the faith. Grant Osborne describes the necessity of personal perseverance like this:

Paul stresses security and election in his writings, but this never removes human responsibility and the place of perseverance in one's life. Election is related to those who have believed and promises God's strength in bringing them to a life of

holiness and to final salvation. At the same time Paul realizes the personal responsibility involved in perseverance. While the Christian is promised God's power, he still must continue to avail himself of that strength. Paul alludes to the danger of apostasy in Rom. 8:12-14; I Cor. 9:27,, 15:1-2; Col. 1:21-23; I Tim. 1:18-20; 4:1, 16. This was a very real danger, and the only antidote was perseverance; while the Christian is promised God's help and protection, he is not given a guarantee (Pinnock 183).

As the author of Hebrews 3:13-14 also encourages the church:

13 But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today,"
14 lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance until the end.

Arminians derive from verses such as this that it is possible for one to be of true faith and then to fall away from the faith.

Conclusion

Two fundamental differences divide Calvinists and Arminians as I have described them. Arminians believe in the freedom of every person to make a free decision to either accept or deny Jesus as Lord and because of this election is dependent upon whether or not one chooses to have faith in Christ. Because everyone has this opportunity, the logical conclusion is that the atoning work of Christ is potentially effective for everyone. Grace, therefore, is not an effective call of God upon one's life that leads to faith, but is the work of Christ on the cross to open up the door to salvation for all who call upon His name.

When one has called upon His name, it is his responsibility to maintain that faith until they are judged.

Clark Pinnock sums up the Arminian view of the salvation historically and practically in this way:

What was notable about Abraham was his faith, his responsiveness to the divine will. "He believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). As the writer to the Hebrews put it, "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which (he) was to receive as an inheritance" (Heb. 11:8). Salvation in the Bible is by the grace of God and is conditioned on an obedient response, apart from which it is not actualized. The vast importance of this response is indicated in Hebrews again: "For the good news did not benefit them, because it did not meet with faith in the hearers" (4:2). Abraham is the father of a new people because he was one who heeded the divine call, and although his descendants since then have not always been as responsive as he was to God, nevertheless, within this very community, in its faithful leaders and prophets, in its humble, believing saints, there has always existed a right understanding and response to God which delights his heart. "The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant" (Psalm 25:14). In the womb of this people, the seed of Abraham, a new possibility for man has emerged, the possibility of entering into a right relationship with God and with fellowman, which is the goal of our being (Pinnock 106).

Arminianism cherishes the belief that humanity is free to choose God and be covered by the blood of Christ as a result of this faith.

Chapter 4: The Biblical Argument

Let us now examine in detail some of the key Bible verses that affect our understanding of election. Two questions must remain in the forefront of our minds as we seek an accurate Biblical understanding of election. To what extent is humanity enslaved by his sinful nature; and, does faith precede election or is faith the product of our being among the elect?

Romans 8:29-30

Let us first consider Romans 8:29-30, which both Arminians and Calvinists consider one of the key passages concerning the questions surrounding election.

29 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; 30 and whom He predestined, these He also called, and whom He called, these He also justified, and whom He justified, these He also glorified. (italics added)

Arminians place great theological weight upon the fact that foreknowledge is listed before predestination in verse twenty-nine. Arminians maintain that the word “foreknew” represents God’s understanding and knowledge before the beginning of creation of who would and who would not choose to have faith in Christ. Cottrell writes:

The Bible explicitly relates predestination to God’s foreknowledge, and a correct understanding of this relationship is the key to the whole question of election to salvation...God’s foreknowledge is the means by which he has determined which individuals shall be conformed to the image of his Son (Pinnock 58-59).

Thus, Arminians read this paragraph as though God predestined “to become conformed to the image of His Son,” and to ultimately be “glorified” all those whom He knew before

hand would freely come to have a saving faith in Christ. If this understanding of these verses is correct, these verses would seem to add a great deal of credence to an Arminian understanding of election. In order to determine whether this understanding is correct we must attempt to find out what Paul meant when he used the word “foreknowledge.”

In order to understand Romans 8:29-30, let us first look at the word “foreknew” in the original Greek. This word is προεγνων. This word is composed of two parts. First, the root word γινωσκω meaning “to know” and secondly, the prefix προ meaning “before.” Thus, the word literally means “to know before.”

This word is used in the New Testament in various forms four additional times. In two of these instances the word is used in its most literal and generic sense and simply means to have a knowledge of something before the fact of its occurring. The first of these two cases is in Acts 26:4-5:

4 So then, all Jews know my manner of life from my youth up, which from the beginning was spent among my own nation and at Jerusalem; 5 since they have *known about me for a long time previously*, if they are willing to testify, that I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion.

In this verse, it is reasonably clear that Luke in quoting Paul is using the word to simply demonstrate the Jews prior knowledge of Paul. Similarly, in II Pet. 3:17, Peter uses the term to simply relate the fact that knowledge was had before a later event might possibly occur. There Peter writes, “You therefore, beloved, *knowing this beforehand*, be on your guard lest, being carried away by the error of unprincipled men, you fall from your own steadfastness.” Based on these verses one possible meaning that Paul may have had in mind when he wrote Rom. 8:29 was that God simply knew beforehand all those who

would come to faith and those whom He knew these he predestined. However, is this the only possibility?

One verse which offers substantial evidence to believe that προγινώσκω may mean God's sovereign choice in election, rather than a simple previous knowledge of faith, is found in Paul's own writing in Romans 11:2. Paul writes, "God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew (προέγνω)." In Romans 11:2, the object of God's foreknowledge is His chosen people Israel. More specifically, however, the object is in reference to those whom God has "kept" from bowing their knees to Baal. Of this remnant of people Paul writes, "In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time, a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Rom. 11:5). Paul's argumentation, therefore, proceeds like this: those whom God foreknew (Israel, 11:1), He also kept from bowing their knee to Baal (11:4); and those He kept, He also graciously chose (11:5). The reason that these 7,000 people have not bowed their knee to Baal was due specifically because they were among God's chosen and foreknown. This rules out the possibility that God simply foresaw a freely chosen faith in these 7,000.

Furthermore, we know that this choice is apart from anything that those people had done of their own merit because Paul immediately adds in Romans 11:6, "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace." As if this were not enough, Paul emphasizes his point even further 11:7, "What then? That which Israel is seeking for, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and rest were hardened." In this verse we see even more clear the distinction between those whom God foreknew against those whom God never knew. Verse seven draws a parallel between the foreknown and the unknown. Those whom God did not choose, he

instead hardened so that they would not be able to believe. In verse eight, Paul offers Scriptural support for this hardening, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes to see not and ears to hear not, down to this very day." These verses indicate that it is God who is in control of who is and who is not among the elect. Therefore, I conclude from these verses, that at least in this instance God's foreknowledge means God's sovereign choice in election.

Other uses of the word γινώσκω (to know) throughout the New Testament seem to indicate that for God to know someone is for God to choose them to be among the elect. For instance, in John 10:14 Jesus, referring to those whom He had chosen to be among his sheep, says, "γινώσκω τὰ ἐμὰ." (I know my own). Again, in Matthew 7:23, referring to those who desire to enter the kingdom of heaven, Jesus says, "I never knew (ἐγνων) you." These verses demonstrate that the word γινώσκω may be used to represent a choice for salvation, not merely a knowledge of faith within an individual. If Matthew had only meant that God had seen the faith, or lack thereof, within those desiring entrance into the kingdom, surely Matthew 7:23 would have read, "Truly, you never knew me."

Based on these verses we may derive several thoughts concerning Romans 8:29-30. First, we may safely conclude that the word "foreknown" is not a universal designation for "foreseen." In other words, one must not assume from this verse that simply because foreknowing precedes predestination that God has predestined the elect based upon foreseen faith. Second, we may conclude that not only is it possible, but it is likely based upon Paul's use of the term in Rom. 11:2 that "foreknown" may refer to those who were divinely chosen apart from their own foreseen faith.

Acts 13:48

Now we must ask our if the rest of the Bible supports such a view, namely that God's choice in election precedes our obedience in faith. Acts 13:48 offers a very clear example of this order. Luke writes that after Paul and Barnabas had finished preaching to the Gentiles in Antioch, "they began rejoicing and glorifying the words of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed." Clearly, the order and the phrasing of this passage is very significant. If Luke had desired to write that faith was the cause of their election, he most certainly would have written, "and all those who believed were appointed to eternal life." However, because Luke writes very carefully and clearly that only those who were appointed for life believed, we may safely conclude that Luke meant for the reader to understand that God's choice preceded the faith in the believers.

Ephesians 2:1-10

More evidence for an understanding of Scripture that places election ahead of faith is found in Ephesians chapter two. There, Paul describes our inability to come to faith of our own free will. Instead, Paul tells the saints in Ephesus that they were "dead in their trespasses and sins, sons of disobedience, by nature children of wrath," and "dead in our transgressions" (Eph. 2: 1, 2, 3, 5). Next, Paul writes, "God made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)" (Eph. 2:5). This verse is very important because it shows that it was God who made us alive together with Christ; it was not the simple product of our own free will.

Paul continues by writing, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it* is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8 italics added). In this verse the word "*it*" plays a central role in how we may understand salvation. There is good

evidence that the word “it” in this verse refers to both grace and faith. This may be understood by the syntax of the Greek in this sentence. The word “it,” (το) in the Greek is in the neuter case, while both of the two nouns that “it” is able to modify, “χαριτι” or “πιστεως,” are in the feminine case. Therefore, grammatically it makes sense that “it” refers to both terms, grace and faith, as it does not have a direct correlation to either of them. By “it” referring to both grace and we faith we may understand that neither faith nor grace are of our own doing. Rather, both grace and faith are gifts of God. This reading most accurately lines up with the verses that immediately precede Eph. 2:8:

4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were *dead* in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (*by grace you have been saved*). (Ephesians 2:4-5, italics added)

Paul added the phrase “by grace” you have been saved to emphasize the fact that it was by none of our own doing, nor by anything we could have earned. Election could not be based on anything foreseen in us because until He saved us by grace we were simply “dead.”

Miscellaneous Verses

2 Corinthians 4:6 seems to indicate that election precedes knowledge of, and by extension faith in, Christ.

For God who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

In this verse our sinful nature is compared to the darkness that encompassed the original creation as found in Genesis chapter one. This darkness was incapable of producing its

own light. At that point God called forth the light and illumined the darkness. In like manner, God overcame the darkness in our lives by “giving the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” Clearly, this giving could not be dependent on our free choosing, because if it were freely chosen, it would no longer have need to have been given. In this verse only those who are of faith have had “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God” shone upon them. This means that those who remains in the darkness have not been given the light which illumines the darkness making it possible to see the face of Christ. This point is exceedingly important because it carries direct implications for the Arminian view that all have been given the opportunity to believe in the gospel of Christ. According to this verse, it appears as though only certain people, those who are of faith, have been given this light that opens the door to faith.

Paul describes his own conversion in this very same way, “But when He who set me apart, even from my mother’s womb, and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me,” (Gal 1:15-16a). This verse demonstrates several key aspects of election. First, Paul election was before his birth before he had done anything. Second, Paul election was made effective through grace. Third, Christ was revealed to Paul according to God’s pleasure. Paul’s conversion to Christianity strongly implies that election precedes faith. Paul had been chosen before his birth to be among the elect before he had done anything on his own. Furthermore, Paul does not appear to have chosen freely to come to faith in Jesus, instead God revealed Christ to Paul. Paul’s free will clearly appears in these verses to have been violated.

Election according to God’s purposes, not our own, is emphasized further in Paul’s second letter to Timothy.

8 Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, or of me His prisoner; but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, 9 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, 10 but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel (1:8-10).

These verses are key to the understanding of election because they appear to speak quite persuasively for both conditional and unconditional election. On the one hand, our calling must be unconditional as it is “according to His own purpose and grace,” while on the other hand this calling may be conditional as it is “granted to us through Christ Jesus.” Despite this paradoxical bent, I believe that these verses strongly suggest that our election is according to unconditional election of certain individuals, rather than conditional election of potentially all individuals. It must be noted first that the arguments an Arminian would make from these verses, namely, that our calling is in Christ Jesus and that He is the one who gives us the ability to be saved are absolutely true. Our election is indeed granted to us in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, without the atoning sacrifice of “Jesus Christ, who abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel,” our hope would be groundless. However, these facts do not erase the fact that this calling of God has gone out to specific individuals. We know that Paul is speaking of specific people because he addresses these verses to “us” (verse 9). This “us” is not a random group of people who have the potential to be saved by faith in accord with the work of Christ, but rather those whom God has “saved...according to His own purpose

and grace.” Clearly, these verses teach that election, our calling to salvation in Christ, is not according to our own free will and according to a purpose of our own, but rather according to God’s own purpose and as a result of his calling.

Romans 9:1-18

Romans 9 represents the key chapter in many Calvinist minds demonstrating God’s unconditional election of his people. Arminians argue that these verses should not be read as teaching individual election, but, rather, group election. Specifically, let us examine Romans 9:1-18.

1 I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, 2 that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, 4 who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, 5 whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

6 But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; 7 neither are they all children because they are Abraham’s descendants, but: “through Isaac your descendants will be named.” 8 That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. 9 For this is a word of promise: “At this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son.” 10 And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our

father Isaac; 11 for though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls 12 it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." 13 Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, But Esau I hated."

14 What shall we say then? There is not injustice with God, is there? May it never be! 15 For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." 16 So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. 17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I raised you up, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth." 18 So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

The basic case that Romans 9 speaks of group election rather than individual and unconditional election is built on the assumption that Jacob and Esau (verses 10-13) are meant to refer to the different nations that God has chosen, not two individuals. This argument takes a great deal of weight in light of verse thirteen where Paul quotes Malachi 1:2b-3a, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." When Malachi speaks it is quite clear that he is referring to two different nations (Jacob representing Israel, Esau representing Edom), rather than two individuals. The argument continues that these nations were not chosen for salvation and damnation; instead, Israel was chosen to receive the covenant blessings while Edom was passed over these blessings. In this situation we now are two steps removed from unconditional election as far as Romans 9 is concerned. If Romans 9 is read in this manner, its main focus is in group dynamics rather than individual election, and does not even refer to God's choice for salvation.

John Piper writes in response to these challenges and describes Romans 9 as a powerful statement for the sovereignty of God in choosing unconditionally individuals both for salvation and damnation. Piper proposes five reasons that Romans 9 ought to be read as though it makes the claim that God chooses unconditionally and individually those whom He will save. I will briefly summarize these five arguments.

Piper argues that such an understanding of Paul argument in Romans 9 fails to grasp the entire line of thought contained therein. Having read many commentaries arguing for the basic Arminian interpretation of Romans 9, Piper writes in response:

It is a remarkable and telling phenomenon that those who find no individual predestination to eternal life in Romans 9:6-13 cannot successfully explain the thread of Paul's argument as it begins in Romans 9:1-5 and continues through the chapter (Piper 58).

Piper believe that the first five verses of Romans 9 are integral to understanding the rest of the chapter. Piper argues that in the first five verses, Paul is setting up the case for the rest of what he has to say. Paul's main point is that there is something amiss when all who are called Israel are not gaining the blessings that are to be Israel's. Paul desires greatly for the blessings that have been bestowed upon Israel in general to be granted to all who are descended from Israel. Indeed, Paul is ready to be cursed himself on behalf of his brethren. Unfortunately, not all who are of Israel are to be granted these blessings. This raises the question of whether or not God's word has fallen. If God's word has fallen, the whole foundation upon which Paul is resting his case has also fallen, which makes this a big question indeed.

Piper argues next that 9:6b (For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel) must not be ignored in understanding the rest of the chapter. Piper writes:

Since the unconditional election of Israelites from within (physical) Israel to be (true, spiritual) Israel cannot be construed as an election to “theocratic privileges” (for all physical Israel has those), and since the immediately preceding distinction made between some Israelites and others (Rom 9:3-5) was that some are accursed and cut off from Christ, therefore we must conclude that Paul views “the purpose of God according to election” (Rom 9:11c) as a purpose to be free from human influence not only in the determination of historical roles but also in the determination of who within Israel are saved and who are not (Piper 66-67).

Next, Piper argues that Romans 9:6b-8 shows the salvific dimension of Paul’s argument. Citing the parallelism between verses 6b and 8a as well as other related texts, especially Galatians 4:26-29 and Romans 2:25-29, Piper argues that the words “children of promise” (Rom 9:8) should not be taken within a simple historical context, but rather as indicative of eternal salvation.

Finally, Piper believes that it becomes clear that Paul may not be speaking of group election because in verses seventeen and eighteen Paul writes about Pharaoh alone. Clearly, Pharaoh is not being used as a representative example of the nation of Egypt. This could not be the case because it is written that God raised up Pharaoh himself, not the nation of Egypt. Furthermore, it was not the nation that was hardened. Instead, it was Pharaoh’s own heart that was hardened and prevented the freeing of Israel from the bonds of slavery.

Assuming that Romans 9 is concerned with the issue of election of individuals to salvation, it becomes very clear that this election must be unconditional predestination. This election cannot be based on foreseen faith because it is written that God's choice of Jacob and Esau was based "not of works, but because of Him who calls." Furthermore, God's choice was made before either had even yet been born. Moreover, we come to understand what is at stake within verse 11 when we read, "in order that God's purpose according to His choice might stand." The greatest issue within this verse is that election is according to God's purposes, not our own. God has chosen us, not based on anything we have done or could ever do, but solely based on His desire to accomplish His own ends. Therefore, I conclude, with John Piper, that Romans 9 is a strong endorsement of unconditional election of individuals to eternal salvation.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

Preliminary Conclusions

I believe that there are a number of conclusions that can be reached from our discussion thus far. I believe that the Scriptural evidence presented in chapter four demonstrates reasonably well that humanity does not have the free ability to choose our his own whether or not to have faith in Jesus Christ. Our bondage to sin is such that it overrides our ability to even choose whether or not to have faith in Christ. Humanity is unable to choose Christ until, as II Corinthians teaches, "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God" is shone in our hearts. This belief is grounded in the idea that only those who have been elected to eternal life are able to believe that Jesus was the Son of God. Acts 13:48 is an incredibly persuasive verse in this regard. Truly, I can think of no other way to understand this verse, except that only those whom God has chosen to believe were granted the eyes to see and the ears to hear and the heart to turn and believe. One major implication of this belief is that not all people have been given the ability to believe in Christ. As God has chosen some to have the ability to believe, He must necessarily have blinded others to ability to know Him.

The second major conclusion that I believe may be reached from the Scripture that we have looked at it that God does not elect his people based on a faith that He has foreseen, but rather He elects in an unconditional manner. God has chosen those who would and those would not be given eyes to see Christ. Romans 9 seems to demonstrate this principle very aptly. God chose Jacob but passed over Esau, and this not on account of anything they had done, but according only to the sovereign choice of His own will.

Implications upon Grace, Atonement, and Perseverance

If humanity is held captive to the sinful nature and, as such, remains unable to freely choose God of his own volition, this means that given the choice between following God or following after the world humanity will always choose the world. The logical conclusion of this state of affairs, apart from an irresistible pull of God which might cause a person to come to faith, is that all people who have ever lived would be damned for eternity, because we would always choose to turn away from God. Clearly, the Bible teaches that not all will be damned. Assuming, therefore, that any part of humanity will be saved, there must be a calling of God that overcomes our natural opposition to Him. This call of God is termed by the Calvinist irresistible grace. Irresistible grace simply means a pull of God on behalf of the sinner that may not be effectually resisted. Were it able to be resisted, our sinful nature would always overcome that pull. Therefore, irresistible grace must be the conclusion if anyone is to be saved.

What does such a theology reflect upon the atoning work of Christ on the cross? Calvinists argue that if one is to accept the doctrine of total depravity, the logical conclusion must also be that the death of Christ on the cross constitutes the means by which God draws the elect unto Himself. The argument continues that because all are not to be saved, the cross must only be effective for those who are among the elect. I disagree with this reasoning. Of all the conclusions that Calvinists reach based on total depravity and unconditional election, limited atonement seems to me to have the least Biblical support on its own. Additionally, it seems to me that part of the logic from the Calvinist's argument is missing. If this reasoning were true, then there must exist an inextricable tie between the irresistible call of grace and the death of Christ. Nowhere in Scripture have I

seen such a tie. In verses that do indicate clearly that it is by grace we have been saved, such as when Paul describes his manner of election Galatians 1:15-16, it is interesting that the revealing of the Son and the call of grace are different factors which seem to indicate a separation between the two. Indeed, the actual crucifixion of Christ is not even mentioned as a factor in this verse as the means by which Paul was called. The revealing of the Son in Paul's life appears to be totally separate from the actual death of Christ.

What is the nature of the death of Christ? There are several things that seem to be reasonable certain about the death of Christ. First, Christ died in some way for all people. It seems clear from several Scriptures that Christ's death could be effective for the salvation of all people (John 3:16, I John 2:2). Despite this fact, it is agreed upon by both Calvinists and Arminians that not all of humanity is going to be saved. There is no such thing as universal atonement. The logical conclusion of this is that the cross is not the means by which grace is made effective in a person's life. If it were, it would be logical that all of humanity would indeed be saved. How is it that Christ's death in some manner makes possible for all people to be saved, but it remains that not all have the possibility of being saved because some are not among the elect? The answer must be that irresistible grace is not the work of the death of Christ. It may be that while the death of Christ makes it possible for all to be atoned for, irresistible grace is a work outside of Christ's death that makes effective the atoning sacrifice of Christ. This solution, although certainly available for more discussion, seems to make the most sense of the verses that speak of the calling of grace that is in accord with the purposes of God. As Romans 9:23 says, "And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory." This means that the death of

Christ makes possible the justification of all people who have ever lived, however because the grace necessary for a person to believe in Christ was not offered by God the Father, the faith necessary to make effective the justification offered by Christ's death was not apparent.

Therefore, I do not believe that limited atonement, as a Calvinist conceives of it, must be a logical conclusion of total depravity. Rather, what must be focused on in terms of the cross of Christ is its allowance of the grace of God to be effective because Christ has paid the price that humanity owed due to sin.

On the other hand, I do believe that the perseverance of the saints is a logical conclusion of unconditional election. If God is the one who effectually calls true faith into existence in the first place, it only makes sense that God would cause those whom He has called to remain in the faith until the day in which they are to be judged. I believe that this doctrine has tremendous Scriptural support. Jesus speaks very clearly about the Father not allowing any of His children to fall away from faith in the book of John:

27 My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; 28 and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand (John 10: 27-29).

These words of Jesus seem very clear. If a person is among Christ's sheep, He will know them and they will follow Him. To these sheep He gives eternal life and they may never be taken away from Him. Furthermore, those who are amongst Christ's sheep are also in God the Father's hand and may never be taken from His care either. Based on these verses alone, I find it nearly impossible to hold to the position that those who have been

called among the elect and are given to faith in Jesus by the Father can ever fall from the faith to which they have been called.

This does not mean that there will not exist those people who declare faith in Christ at some point and then fall away from the body later on. I John describes a situation in the church like this:

They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us (I John 2:19).

These verses make it clear that it is possible to profess faith at some point and not be among the elect. Because of this, I conclude that the Arminian doctrine on this question is the better one to live by practically. The members of the body of Christ must constantly “take heed lest they fall” (I Cor. 10:12). The body is called upon to make our calling and election certain (II Pet. 1:10). Many Bible passages seem to emphasize the responsibility on the part of the person to continue in the faith. All of this must be considered in light of the grace that allows us to remain in the faith. Despite the fact that we must fight to remain in the true faith, we must remember that it is only by the grace of God that we are allowed to remain at all. Were He to pull His hand away, our sinful nature would once again enslave us to the chains of sin.

Implications for the Church

How valuable is this debate over an understanding of election for the Church today? Does it only serve to engage the Church in unnecessary tensions, strife, anger, and frustration that could be averted without any consequence if the Church simply agreed to disagree and left the issue undiscussed? Is the solution to the disagreements that exist

over election simply to ignore the issue and work on issues that have more immediate consequences? I believe that the doctrine of election is a very important issue and one that is worthy of discussion. However, I must preface my remarks with some words of warning and some wisdom that I believe we can learn from the past.

In the past, the issue of election has been used to severely divide the Church. It has been used to brand parts of the Church as heretics and there have even been people murdered over this issue. Of course, my prayer is that this never happens again. Indeed, my prayer is that the doctrine of election does not divide the Church at all. Whether one considers themselves Calvinist or Arminian or both or neither is not an issue of salvation itself; it is an issue of how one understands God's and mankind's role in salvation. This issue ought never to be construed as a matter of heresy. When the jailer asks Paul and Silas what he must do in order to be saved. Paul does not respond, "You must understand that it God who called you." Instead, Paul simply says, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). Salvation is a matter of whether or not one believes in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. The question that election strives to answer is how the process works in which one comes to believe in Jesus and the manner in which that salvation is granted unto them.

A second area that the Church must heavily guard itself against is complacency in witnessing to others. Some branches of the Church, known as hyper-Calvinists, have taken unconditional election to an extreme degree and distorted its original meaning. Believing that God alone determined who would and would not be saved, this group has held that witnessing to nonbelievers is unnecessary because if God desired that someone would believe it would occur outside of the Church apart from our efforts to evangelize.

Calvin, himself, strongly preached against this attitude. Calvin held strongly to the belief that the Church must go and seek to save the lost. Calvin recognized the fact that even though God may choose those who will believe, we do not know who those people may be and as such it is the Church's duty to spread the seed of God's word so that everyone might hear the good news. At this point those whom God has chosen may turn from their sinful ways and believe. Calvin writes:

So shall it come about that we try to make everyone we meet a sharer in our peace. But our peace will rest upon the sons of peace [Luke 10:6; cf. Matt.10:13]. Hence, as far as we are concerned,...a healthy and severe rebuke should be applied as a medicine to all that they may not either perish themselves or destroy others. It belongs to God, however, to make that rebuke useful to those whom he...has foreknown and predestined (Calvin Chap. XXIII, Sect. 14).

This fits precisely with what Paul writes in Romans 10:13-14:

14 For "Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved." 15 How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?

Clearly, it is God's desire for the Church to witness to those who have not heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is my desire that the debate over election never prove a detriment in the pursuit of that goal.

Despite these potential difficulties, I believe that discussing the nature of election within the Church does have some very relevant and useful ends. With Calvin, I believe that God has given us the entire Bible that we may understand those things that He has

revealed to us. That which God has revealed to mankind through Scripture ought to be studied profusely and anything which may be understood should also be taught as that which has been revealed by God. Paul did not limit Scripture to the non-controversial passages when he wrote that "*all* Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (II Tim. 3:16, italics added). Therefore, because Scripture does speak about election to some length, I conclude that its continued study and teaching should remain a part of the Church body despite the potentiality of division within the body.

I believe that a proper understanding and teaching of election is also necessary in order that the Church give to God the glory that is due His name. It makes the most sense to me that God is most glorified when He is considered the One who determined the salvation of those who are to be saved. When God is understood as the giver of faith there is no longer any room for boasting in anything other than God. If, however, one considers that the faith he has come about by their own volition, some room for boasting may be found. A person who believes that they have freely chosen to have faith in Christ might say, "I chose that faith." In this scenario, God must be viewed as the one who responds, rather than the one who acts. When God is the initiator of faith, however, God must truly be given all the glory. Then a person must say, "It is only God to whom I must give all glory, honor, and praise, for He did it all. He saved my soul, for when I had no inclination to turn to God, He chose me to have faith and to be among the elect."

A very practical area of life that a proper understanding of election plays a role is in the realm of prayer. If God has no ability to change whether or not someone will believe in Him, prayers that He would save others would be completely in vain. If

humanity were given a free will that God could not override, then it would be useless to pray that God would save anyone. For an Arminian to pray that God would save the lost would be to ask God to breach the free will that He has given unto them. In light of this, it has been said that Arminians virtually always pray for the unsaved as a Calvinist would pray. A Calvinist would pray that God would overcome an unbeliever's bondage to sin and save the person from the torments of hell. This may appear to be an insignificant detail in the life of a Christian, but I believe that at the heart of this issue lies something greater. At the heart of prayer lies an understanding of how we view the working of God in relation to this world. To pray to God as an Arminian might pray who believes in the free will of the individual would be to pray to an impotent God. On the other hand, it appears to me that to pray to God as a Calvinist might pray to God is to exult God in all His might as the God who has the ability to control the creation that He has made.

Final Conclusions

My study of some of the questions relating to election began with an inquiry into the nature of free will and an understanding of whether election was conditional upon faith or unconditional and based upon the sovereign will of God. In studying these questions, I found that both sides of the debate offer very persuasive Biblical arguments. I also found that there are a number of questions that this thesis has not touched upon and which may be desirable for continued studying. For instance, this essay did not discuss the element of time in God's knowledge, foreknowledge, and election. When God chose the elect is an incredibly important discussion that has tremendous repercussions for the rest of this debate. Indeed, it has also been questioned as to whether or not God even works outside of time. Many theologians subscribe to what is often referred to as "open-

theism” which holds that God works predominately within time. Obviously, believing that God works within time could greatly change how a person views election.

With regard to the questions that I did ask, I have found my own opinions shift almost weekly as I have attempted to understand the most accurate Biblical interpretation of election. The conclusions that I have reached appear to me to offer the best holistic rendering of the Biblical account of election. Certainly one area that I will devote greater study to as a result of these inquiries is into hermanuetics. This search has increased my desire to understand how the Bible fits together and gives us a picture of the workings of God. Despite my inadequacies in this realm, I feel that I have shown some very important things theologically. I believe that this study has shed light upon how the Christian Church ought to understand how a person comes to faith. It is through our election among the saints that we are afforded the opportunity to come to faith in Christ. This election takes place, not as a result of any choice that we have made, but solely as a result of the choice of God’s sovereign immutable will. To God be all glory, honor, and praise.

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