

Divine Election of Grace

Properly regarded, divine election is the free sovereign decision and utterly contingent act of God's Love in pure liberality or unconditional Grace whether in creation or in redemption. As such it is neither arbitrary nor necessary, for it flows freely from an ultimate reason or purpose in the invariant Love of God and is entirely unconditioned by any necessity, whether of being or knowledge or will, in God and entirely unconstrained and unmotivated by anything whatsoever beyond himself. What we cannot understand is *why*, but here we have to do with the relation between the uncreated Rationality of God and the created rationality of our world and so with the divine reason for election which lies hidden deep behind all the reasonableness of the created order. In so far as that reason is disclosed in the incarnation, it is to be equated with the sheer mystery of God's Love which knows no reason beyond its own ultimateness as the Love that God eternally is. Election refers to the eternal decision which is nothing less than the Love that God himself is, in action; it is the unconditional self-giving of God in the undeflecting constancy of his Grace which, as we have seen, flows freely and equably to all irrespective of any claim or worth or reaction on their part.

In this perspective the doctrine of election is to be appreciated as a way of expressing the unqualified objectivity of God's Love and Grace toward us, and the ultimate invariant ground in God himself on which all our faith and trust in him for our salvation in life and death repose. It represents a strictly theonomous way of thinking, from a centre in God and not from a centre in ourselves. As such the doctrine of election rejects any idea that we may establish contact with God or know or worship him through acting upon him, and certainly any idea that we can induce God to act in accordance with what we think or claim or want, for all our relations with God derive from his activity in Grace upon us whereby he freely establishes reciprocity between himself and us, within which he makes room for us and establishes us in an authentic creaturely freedom grounded and secured in his own unlimited Freedom as God. Thus the doctrine of election, as both the Old Testament and the New Testament teach, is the counterpart to the doctrine of the covenant of Grace which God unilaterally establishes and maintains between himself and his creation. The doctrine of election also rejects any projection of human ways of thought, speech or behavior, or any creaturely representation, into God – that is the way of mythology – but calls instead for a radical discrimination of what is objectively real in God from all our subjective states and creaturely fancies. In this respect the doctrine of election, as St. Paul made so clear, is the counterpart to the doctrine of the incarnation as the projection of God's eternal purpose of Love into our creaturely existence and its embodiment in a unique and exclusive way in Jesus Christ through whom true relations between God and man and man and God are established. The incarnation, therefore, may be regarded as the eternal decision or election of God in his Love not to be confined, as it were, within himself alone, but to pour himself out in unrestricted Love upon the world which he has made and to actualize that Love in Jesus Christ in such a way within the conditions of our spatio-temporal existence that he constitutes the one Mediator between God and man through whom we may all freely participate in the unconditional Love and Grace of God. Thus the incarnation was held by Reformed theology, as it had been held by Patristic theology, to be the exact antithesis of all mythology, for far from being a projection of the human and the creaturely into the realm of the divine, it is the self-projection of the divine into the human which grounds all its creaturely reality beyond itself in the objective Reality of God.

Now what became of this doctrine of election in Protestant Scholasticism within the determinate yet dualist framework of the Augustinian-Aristotelian thought which it developed soon after the Reformation and then of the Augustinian-Newtonian thought which succeeded it? Reformed theology rightly stressed the priority or provenience or unsurpassability of God's Grace and often preferred the term 'predestination' to the term 'election', but what did it mean by the *pre* in predestination? Originally it was intended to make the point that the Grace by which we are saved is grounded in the inner Life of God himself, and that we are saved by the Grace of God alone. Predestination means therefore that no matter what a man thinks or does he cannot constitute himself a being under Grace, he cannot constitute himself a man loved by God, for he is that already. That is to say, the *pre* in predestination emphasizes the sheer

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objectivity of God's Grace. However, a different view began to emerge in which election could be spoken of as 'preceding grace', in line with which predestination could be regarded as a causal antecedent to our salvation in time. That is what happened. Within the framework of Augustinian-Aristotelian thought and its combination of St. Augustine's notion of irresistible grace with an Aristotelian doctrine of final cause, the concept of predestination took on a strong determinist slant. And within the framework of Augustinian-Newtonian thought, in which absolute mathematical time and space were clamped down upon relative phenomenal time and space, causally and logically conditioning them, the kind of *prius* [something that precedes or takes precedence] with which, it was thought, we operate in our temporal-spatial and logico-causal connections was read back into divine predestination, yet in an 'absolute' or 'inertial' way, so that there arose the doctrine of so-called 'absolute particular predestination'. But to interpret *pre-*destination in this way, as an absolute-temporal and absolute-causal *prius*, gave rise to very grave problems. On the one hand, it traced predestination back to an eternal irresistible decree in God which by-passes, so to speak, the incarnation and the cross, grounding it in some arcane 'dark patch' in God behind the back of Jesus Christ. This had the effect of driving a deep wedge between Jesus Christ and God, thereby introducing by the back door an element of Nestorianism into Calvinist Christology, which called in question any final and essential relation between the incarnate Son and God the Father and threatened to extinguish the light of the Gospel. It is hardly surprising that a Calvinism of this kind which stressed the utter impassibility and immutability of God should have given rise again and again to a heretical liberal theology with its denial of the Deity of Christ. Yet such a position is far removed from that which Calvin himself adopted, when he insisted that Christ himself is the 'mirror of election', for it takes place *in him* in such a way that he is the Origin and the End, the Agent and the Substance of election – that is, if Aristotelian language is to be used, Christ himself is to be thought of as the 'Cause' of election in all four senses of 'cause', the formal and final, the efficient and the material. Hence Calvin insisted that to think of predestination as taking place somehow apart from Christ is to plunge into an inextricable 'labyrinth' of error and darkness.

On the other hand, by reading back (in some kind of way) into God temporal, causal and logical relations from our experience in this world, Calvinism was forced to connect the relative apparent distinctions between the believing and unbelieving, the obedient and disobedient, to the absolute decree of God. Hence, predestination had to be construed (in the 'inertial' way noted above) into the double form of 'election' and 'reprobation'. This entailed, however, a duality in God himself, an ultimate 'Yes' and an ultimate 'No', which could not be explained away by claiming, as was often done, that the 'No' of reprobation was only a 'passing over' of some people rather than a deliberate damnation of them. At this point Calvinism is trapped in its own logic. There is an important sense in which we may speak of 'the logic of grace', i.e., the pattern exhibited by God's Grace in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, all through which he acted under the freely accepted constraint of his unreserved self-giving for our salvation. But to construe that in terms of necessary, logical connections is to convert grace into something quite other than it is, for it would imply, for example, that there is not a free contingent relations between the self-giving of Christ for us on the cross and our salvation, but a logico-causal relation. It is on the bases of just such a logico-causal understanding of divine Grace that the twin errors of 'limited atonement' and 'universal salvation' arise. Thus it is argued, *a posteriori*, that if as a matter of fact some people believe in Christ and are saved and others reject Christ and are damned, then Christ must have died only for the believing and not for the unbelieving. But it is also argued, *a priori*, that if Christ died for all people, then all people must be and will be saved. But of course if we had to depend on a logical relation between the death of Jesus and the forgiveness of sins, we would all be unforgiven whether we believe or not.

Calvin himself had taken up a different position, in accordance with which he held with St. Paul that there is not a 'Yes' and a 'No' in God but only the 'Yes' of his Grace which he speaks equally to all, the just and the unjust alike. Hence if it happens that some people do not believe and perish, that can be understood only as an 'accidental' or 'adventitious' result, for Jesus Christ came to save and not to

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condemn, and it is of the nature of the Gospel to bring life and not death, just as it is the nature of light to enlighten and not bring blindness or darkness. That is to say, we cannot think this matter out on a logical basis, as if there has to be a kind of logical balance between election and reprobation, for in both the activity of God must be construed as Grace alone. It was for this reason that Calvin refused to agree that condemnation or reprobation should be inserted into a Christian confession of faith for it is an irrational and inexplicable happening, contrary to the intention of Christ and his Gospel.

Sufficient has been said to indicate that when the grace of election is submitted to interpretation within a dualist and determinate framework of thought governed by the primacy of number in which time and movement are transmuted into mathematical and mechanical patterns, the basic equilibrium of thought is disrupted and understanding of election ends up in contradictions and absurdities. Moreover, the concept of predestination with its stress upon the objectivity of Grace is turned on its head, for instead of being thought of as the dynamic self-movement of God's Love into our human existence in the incarnation of his eternal Son, it is distorted into a mythological projection into the realm of God's Being and Activity of culture-conditioned concepts and creaturely distinctions. Thus a radically objectivist notion of election or predestination passes over into its opposite.

Thomas F. Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture* (1981), pp. 131-137

[S]everal comments on this understanding of Christ's sacrifice may be in place. While traditional forensic language is used, the atoning sacrifice is not to be understood as fulfilled by Christ merely as man (which would imply a Nestorian Christology), but of Christ as the one Mediator between God and man who is himself God and man in one Person. This means that 'the joyful atonement made between God and man by Christ Jesus, by his death, resurrection and ascension', is not to be understood in any sense as the act of the man Jesus placating God the Father, but as a propitiatory sacrifice in which God himself through the death of his dear Son draws near to man and draws man near to himself. It is along these lines also that we must interpret the statement of the Scots Confession that Christ 'suffered in body and soul to make the full satisfaction for the sins of the people', for in the Cross God accepts the sacrifice made by Christ, whom he did not spare but delivered him up for us all, as satisfaction, thereby acknowledging his own bearing of the world's sin guilt and judgment as the atonement. As Calvin pointed out in a very important passage, God does not love us because of what Christ has done, but it is because he first loved us that he came in Christ in order through atoning sacrifice in which God himself does not hold himself aloof but suffers in and with Christ to reconcile us to himself. Nor is there any suggestion that this atoning sacrifice was offered only for some people and not for all, for that would imply that he who became incarnate was not God the Creator in whom all men and women live and move and have their being, and that Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour was not God and man in the one Person, but only an instrument in the hands of the Father for the salvation of the chosen few. In other words, a notion of limited atonement implies a Nestorian heresy in which Jesus Christ is not really God and man united in one Person. It must be added that perfect response offered by Jesus Christ in life and death to God in our place and on our behalf, contains and is the pledge of our response. Just as the union of God and man in Christ holds good in spite of all the contradiction of our sin under divine judgment, so his vicarious response holds good for us in spite of our unworthiness: 'not I but Christ'....

Thomas F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology: From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell*, 18-9

I believe that the larger Christian community owes a serious debt to Calvinism. Almost single-handedly it has maintained an interest in the stunning, gospel-filled doctrine of election. Granted, that what it gives with the one hand (election is true), it takes away with the other (it is only true for some), but what could be more stunning than the truth that we were known and loved and indeed embraced by the Father, Son and Spirit from all eternity. My beef with the Calvinists here is not with the fact of our election, but with the way they limit it, and thus limit its preaching as the unconditional truth for all. Be that as it may, I am grateful to my own tradition for keeping the heart of the gospel before us, even in its limited form. What the Calvinists think is true for only a few, should be proclaimed to every person on the planet: "The Father

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himself set his love upon you before the foundation of the world and predestined you to be adopted into the very trinitarian life of God. And his own beloved Son, Jesus Christ, has come and accomplished his Father's dreams for you and the human race."

C. Baxter Kruger

Athanasius ... made me see that whatever we say about God (or about God's will) has to be grounded in the relationship of the Father, Son and Spirit, for there is nothing deeper about the being of God than this relationship. The ideas that God would elect some to salvation and pass others by, or outright reject them, must be, theologically speaking, grounded in this relationship. It is obvious how election to adoption would flow out of the Father-Son relationship, for the Father loves the Son and shares all things with him in the Spirit. So it is not out of character or odd that the blessed Trinity would think of including others in the trinitarian life. But why would this God think of excluding? What about the life that the Triune God lives would ever lead to the deliberate damning of people? Does such an idea flow out of the way the Father and Son relate? Is there are part or side of the Father that is disinterested in his Son, neutral, even eager to dismiss, look over, and, indeed, to reject him? And is it this dark side of the Father's relationship with his Son that thus gives natural rise to the rejection of large parts of humanity? Or perhaps there is a second Son, banished from the Father's love and presence from all eternity, and thus in the Father's rejection of the second Son originates the idea of the Father rejecting part of his creation? If you cannot ground God's decision to pass by or to reject parts of his own creation in the relationship of the Father, Son and Spirit itself—in God's very being—what is its ground? Is there something deeper about God than the love and fellowship of the Father, Son and Spirit? Is there a god behind the back of the Trinity who ultimately calls the shots? While I have actually had Calvinists contend that the New Testament never teaches that fellowship is at the core of God's being, for me it was a scriptural, historical and theological no-brainer. So for me, the doctrine of double predestination (of electing some and damning others) is patently non-Christian, because it cannot be grounded in the blessed life and way of relating of the Father, Son and Spirit. And if you cannot say that there is a part of the Father that eternally rejects his beloved Son (and who would dare think of such a thing), then there is no theological basis—in the being of God—for positing why God would think of passing by or rejecting large parts of his creation, or even conceive of such sadness. For me, the reprobating part of the Calvinists' doctrine of double-predestination both denies that the Trinity is the ultimate and eternal truth about God, and supposes that there is something deeper about God than the fellowship of the Father, Son and Spirit that ultimately calls the shots for creation.

C. Baxter Kruger

Election is the love of God enacted and inserted into history in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, so that in the strictest sense Jesus Christ is the election of God. He is the one and indivisible act of divine love. There is therefore no decree of predestination which precedes this act of grace or goes behind the back of Jesus Christ, for that would be to split the act of God into two, and to divide Christ from God. Jesus Christ is wholly identical with God's action, that which was, and that which is, and that which shall be, the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Thomas F. Torrance, *Universalism or Election?* (Scottish Journal of Theology, 2), pp. 310-318

The Incarnation of the Son of God means therefore that the eternal Word of God has become event in time, and that through the Cross the eternal decision of God has invaded the sphere of our temporal relations. Just because the love of God is not only act in time but a Person, Jesus Christ, the eternal election of God has become encounter, acutely personalised in the midst of our choices and decisions, demanding response and decision. Election is not therefore some dead predestination in the past or some still point in a timeless eternity, but a living act that enters time and confronts us face to face in Jesus Christ the living Word of God. Precisely because this Word is also eternal it is always contemporary with us, travelling, as it were, through time. The great fact of the Gospel then is this: that God has actually chosen us in Jesus Christ in spite of our sin, and that in the death of Christ that election has become a *fait accompli*.

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It means too that God has chosen all men, in as much as Christ died for all men, and because that is once and for all no one can ever elude the election of His love, as no one exists except by the Word of God by whom in as much all things were made and in whom all things consist, and in as much as this is the Word that has once and for all enacted the eternal election of grace to embrace all men, the existence of every man whether he will or no is bound up inextricably with that election—with the Cross of Jesus Christ. Every man's being is bound up forever with the one and indivisible act of God's love in Jesus Christ. How could it be otherwise? The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the final reality of our world upon which everything else depends. All things are summed up in Him, things visible, and invisible, whether they be things in earth or things in heaven. The whole universe revolves round the Love of God in Jesus Christ and all its motion depends entirely upon Him.

Thomas F. Torrance, *Universalism or Election?* (Scottish Journal of Theology, 2), pp. 310-318

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has crowned us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms in Christ; even as, in His love, He chose us as His own in Christ before the creation of the world, that we might be holy and without blemish in His presence. For He pre-destined us to be adopted by Himself as sons through Jesus Christ—such being His gracious will and pleasure—to the praise of the splendour of His grace with which He has enriched us in the beloved One. It is in Him, and through the shedding of His blood, that we have our deliverance—the forgiveness of our offences—so abundant was God's grace, the grace which He, the possessor of all wisdom and understanding, lavished upon us, when He made known to us the secret of His will. And this is in harmony with God's merciful purpose for the government of the world when the times are ripe for it—the purpose which He has cherished in His own mind of restoring the whole creation to find its one Head in Christ; yes, things in Heaven and things on earth, to find their one Head in Him. In Him we Jews have been made heirs, having been chosen beforehand in accordance with the intention of Him whose might carries out in everything the design of His own will, so that we should be devoted to the extolling of His glorious attributes—we who were the first to fix our hopes on Christ. And in Him you Gentiles also, after listening to the Message of the truth, the Good News of your salvation—having believed in Him—were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit; that Spirit being a pledge and foretaste of our inheritance, in anticipation of its full redemption—the inheritance which He has purchased to be specially His for the extolling of His glory.

The Apostle Paul, Letter to the Ephesians (1:3-14), Weymouth

Paul is not standing at his desk engaged in dialectical argumentation [referent: Ephesians 1—JN]; rather he is on his knees, lost in adoring worship.

Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*, p.184

The purpose of the Biblical doctrine of election in Christ is to encourage Christians see the greatness of the Triune God, who by His grace, has set His saving designs upon them from before the foundation of the world, and to thereby move them to a worthy response in all of life.

James D. Nickel

... By a complete misunderstanding of the noble and true doctrine of the freedom of the human will salvation is made to depend perilously upon the will of man instead of upon the will of God.

However deep the mystery, however many the paradoxes involved, it is still true that men become saints not at their own whim but by sovereign calling. Has not God by such words as these taken out of our hands the ultimate choice? "It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing ... All that the Father giveth me shall come to me ... No man can come to me, except the Father which hath set me draw him ... No man can come unto me, except it were given him of my Father ... Thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou has given him ... It pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, to reveal his Son in me."

God has made us in His likeness, and one mark of that likeness is our free will. We hear God say, "Whosoever will, let him come." We know by bitter experience the woe of an unsundered will and the

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blessedness or terror which may hang upon our human choice. But back of all this and preceding it is the sovereign right of God to call saints and determine human destinies. The master choice is His, the secondary choice is ours. Salvation is from our side a choice, from the divine side it is a seizing upon, an apprehending, a conquest by the Most High God. *Our “accepting” and “willing” are reactions rather than actions.* The right of determination must always remain with God.

God has indeed lent to every man the power to lock his heart and stalk away darkly into his self-chosen night, as He has lent to every man the ability to respond to His overtures of grace, but while the “no” choice may be ours, the “yes” choice is always God’s. He is the Author of our faith as He must be its Finisher. Only by grace can we continue to believe; we can persist in willing God’s will only as we are seized upon by a benign power that will overcome our natural bent to unbelief.

A. W. Tozer, *The Divine Conquest*, pp. 48-49

Some people have an inner drive to do things as a means of self-authentication or proving one’s worth. For the Biblical Christian, the worth matter is settled once and for all by grace; i.e., in one’s relationship to the elected Lord Jesus Christ. Hence, what one does no longer has the aspect of drivenness in it.

James Nickel

Because all Christian doctrines relate to God who is ultimately beyond our comprehension, there will inevitably be some element of mystery, or transcendence, that cannot be reduced to human understanding. Nonetheless, within these limits the theological effort must be carried on.

J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology*, p. 16

God intentionally designed salvation so that no man could boast of it. He didn’t merely arrange it so that boasting would be discouraged or kept to a minimum—He planned it so that boasting would be absolutely excluded. Election does precisely that.

Mark Webb, “What Difference Does it Make?” *Reformation and Revival Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Winter 1994, p. 52

Repentance is not a special method for saving ourselves; it is a way of admitting that we cannot save ourselves at all. It is a way of throwing ourselves on the mercy of God and begging the Saviour to save us.

Philip Ryken, *The Message of Salvation*, p. 60