

The Doctrine of Election

1. Introduction
2. Biblical Theology
 - a. Word Study
 - b. Bible Texts
3. Systematic Theology
 - a. Doctrine of Grace
 - b. Doctrine of Love
4. Conclusion

1. Introduction

The doctrine that God elects the sinner to eternal life out of free and sovereign grace was a stumbling block for many ever since the inspired sermon was preached.

In Romans 9, Paul cites the very questions that are still raised today:

“What then shall we say? Is God unjust?” – Rom 9:14

“Then why does God blame us? For who resists his will?” – Rom 9:19

“Why did you make me like this?” – Rom 9:20

The discussion revived with the publication of Dave Hunt’s *What Love Is This?* that one has labelled “an extraordinary complete, modern treatment of the classic Arminian view of Christianity.”¹ However, Hunt’s work not only attacks Calvin but also Arminius since it upholds the doctrine of eternal security. About human depravity he at the same time agrees with Pelagius.² The confusion has reached the German speaking world with Streitenberger’s book *Die Fünf Punkte des Calvinismus*

¹ John Barber, “Review: Dave Hunt’s ‘What Love Is This? Calvinism’s Misrepresentation of God’,” *IIM Magazine Online*, Vol. 4, No. 17, April 27 to May 4, 2002, 4f.; available from http://thirdmill.org/newfiles/joh_barber/PT.Barber.calvinism.hunt.pdf; Internet (accessed 04 December 2008); cf. Dave Hunt, *What Love Is This? Calvinism’s Misrepresentation of God*, 2nd ed. (Oregon: The Berean Call, 2004).

² David M. Doran, “A Review Article: What Love Is This?” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 8 (Fall 2003): 120 and 127.

that relies heavily upon Hunt.³ Extensive reviews were written and the reader is encouraged to read a few to form his own opinion.⁴

The resulting division of the Christian church is equally apparent. The more than 100 reviews of Hunt's work at the 'amazon' bookstore are split into 'five star' and 'one star' ratings. Dave Hunt and James White engaged in an open debate that resulted in a publication.⁵ The quality of reviews and arguments is frequently diminished by inherent prejudice and polemic. However, "By their fruit you will recognize them" (Mt 7:16), therefore slander or division does not speak for its source. As Chuck Smith put it, "I would rather have the wrong facts and a right attitude, than right facts and a wrong attitude."⁶ While not on his side in regard to the issue at

³ Peter Streitenberger, *Die Fünf Punkte des Calvinismus. Eine Antwort* (Hünfeld: CMD, 2007).

⁴ Steven J. Cole, "What Theology is This? Dave Hunt's Misrepresentation of God and Calvinism," *The Highway* [home-page online]; available from <http://www.the-highway.com/br_whatloveisthis.html>; Internet (accessed 04 December 2008); David M. Doran, "A Review Article: What Love Is This?", 101-130; Laurence M. Vance, "A Review of Dave Hunt's 'What Love Is This? Calvinism's Misrepresentation of God'," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Autumn 2002): 41-44; Joachim Schmitsdorf, „Rezension: Peter Streitenberger, ‚Die Fünf Punkte des Calvinismus. Eine Antwort‘,“ *Betanien Verlag* [home-page online]; available from <<http://www.betanien.de/verlag/material/Rezension-5Punkte.pdf>>; Internet (accessed 04 December 2008).

⁵ Dave Hunt and James White, *Debating Calvinism: Five Points, Two Views* (Oregon: Multnomah Books, 2004).

⁶ Chuck Smith, *Calvinism, Arminianism & the Word of God – A Calvary Chapel Perspective*. Available from <<http://www3.calvarychapel.com/library/smith-chuck/books/caatwog.htm#0i>>; Internet (accessed 04 December 2008).

stake⁷, the student prays for the same spirit while writing on the subject of election.

Besides, he joins the words of Wallace who replied to a Pastor:

Although I will express my opinion, you of course have to come to your own conclusions. Having a good conscience about the text doesn't require agreement with others; it requires being faithful to pursue truth at all costs to the best of your abilities. To be sure, you want to seek the counsel and input of various experts. But when the day is done, you have to stand before God and tell him how you see your views as in harmony with Holy Writ. In other words, I never want you to feel any kind of intimidation or pressure from me or anyone else about your handling of the text. I do of course want you to feel a great duty (as you always have) to the Lord in the handling of his word. At bottom, all of us have to give an account of ourselves to the Lord, and any human loyalties will have no standing before him.⁸

We will study about the doctrine of election by way of word studies and exegesis of the relevant texts and then proceed with a systematic approach.

2. Biblical Theology

a. Word Study

Paul uses three words referring to election. The verb *eklegomai* appears four times in his letters (1 Cor 1:27-28; Eph 1:4), the noun *ekloge* five times (Rom 9:11; 11:5,7,28; 1 Thess 1:4) and the adjective *eklektos* six times (Rom 8:33; 16:13; Col

⁷ Smith promotes the Arminian position; cf. *ibid.*

⁸ Daniel B. Wallace, "Corporate Election," *Bible.org* [home-page online], available from <http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=384>; Internet (accessed 28 November 2008), 1.

3:12; 1 Tim 5:21; 2 Tim 2:10; Tit 1:1). Closely related are the terms *proorizo* translated “to predestine/predestinate” (Rom 8:29.30; Eph 1:5.11) and *haireo* meaning “to choose” (2 Thess 2:13). In 1 Cor 1:27-28, Paul teaches that God elected or ‘chose’ the foolish, weak, lowly and despised things, “so that no one may boast before him.” (1 Cor 1:29) God ‘chose’ them before they were created. (Eph 1:4) “God’s purpose in election” stood even before Jacob and Esau were born. (Rom 9:11) God ‘chose’ man before he has breathed, believed or done anything at all.

In classical Greek, the word group refers to a selection or choice by someone. An object is selected, chosen or picked out for oneself.⁹ The subject is acting upon an object, which is done according to the decision of the subject. In theological terms, God the subject is choosing man the object according to his will and purpose. It is important to note here that “it is God who elects, who calls, who purposes and who predestinates.”¹⁰ Charles Hodge, in line with Augustine and Calvin, presses this further and says that *it is God who determines who are to be saved.*¹¹

⁹ W.A. Elwell, “Election and Predestination,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Hawthorne, Gerald F., Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1993), 226; Walter Bauer, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, and F.W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v. „eklegomai“; James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (electronic ed.) (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996), no. 1586.

¹⁰ W.A. Elwell, “Election and Predestination,” 225.

¹¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd vol. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 330.

Arminians agree that God determines *but* based on his foreknowledge about man's free-will response to the gospel.¹² Though possible from the chronological perspective, this would no longer be 'election' in its plainest sense of the word.¹³ From the *logical* viewpoint God's decision must precede man's response to the gospel, since the latter is only the means of salvation, not the cause which is rooted in God. God elects man for salvation, not the reverse. (cf. 2 Thess 2:13; 2 Tim 1:9)

b. Bible Texts

The argument is reinforced by Ephesians 2:8 teaching that salvation in its totality including the means 'through faith' is a gift.¹⁴ (Phil 1:29; cf. 2 Pet 1:1; Lk 22:32) But if faith is a gift of God for salvation, how does God elect man based on His foreknowledge? Spurgeon illustrates:

“But,” others say, “God elected them on the foresight of their faith.” Now, God gives faith therefore He could not have elected them on account of faith, which He foresaw. If there were twenty beggars in the street, and I determine to give one of them a dollar, will anyone say that I determined to give that one a dollar, that I elected him to have the dollar, because I foresaw that he would have it? That would be talking nonsense.¹⁵

¹² Jack W. Cottrell, “The Classical Arminian View of Election,” in *Perspectives on Election*, ed. C.O. Brand. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 72; cf. Peter Streitenberger, *Die Fünf Punkte des Calvinismus*, 40f.

¹³ Contra Sam Storms, „Series: Divine Election,“ *Enjoying God Ministries* [home-page online], available from <<http://www.enjoyinggodministries.com/studies/divine-election/>> (accessed 02 December 2008), “Biblical Terminology of Election”; Storms says neither position is confirmed by the intrinsic meaning of the Greek terms.

¹⁴ Ibid., “Relevant Biblical Texts on Faith as a Gift of God.”

¹⁵ C.H. Spurgeon, “Election.” *Bible Bulletin Board* [home-page online],

The verse in Ephesians harks back to its preceding chapter that teaches election. Here Paul writes that God chose man in Christ. (Eph 1:4.5.11) Arminian teachers say that 'in Christ' is the boat or elect vessel in which man is chosen.¹⁶ The concept is entitled 'corporate election' of a group of people who join in the election of Christ. But again, what kind of election is 'corporate election'? If only Christ is elected as the boat which man still has to enter, in how far is man actually 'elected'? Election is not to be confused with mere recognition, condition or reward.

'Corporate election' is also promoted in exposition of Romans 9-11 about the history of Israel. Arminians here distinguish between Abrahamic and salvific election. Romans 9-11, some say, does not relate to the salvation of people but to God's plan in regard to corporate Israel. Hunt explicitly concludes about Romans 9: "Paul is not at all dealing with the eternal destiny of Esau, Jacob and Pharaoh."¹⁷ Contrary to that, not only the passage itself with its climax in Rom 11:26 ("all Israel will be saved"), but also God's election in general frequently relates to salvation. Schreiner argues by including a number of references:

available from <<http://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/elect.htm>>; Internet (accessed 02 December 2008).

¹⁶ Nicholas Liguori, „Predestination and Election in Ephesians 1,“ *Evangelical Arminians* [home-page online], available from <<http://evangelicalarminians.com/node/291>>; Internet (accessed 09 December 2008).

¹⁷ Dave Hunt, *What Love Is This?*, 337.

When Paul refers to “the children of God,” he always has in mind those who are saved (Rom 8:16, 21; Phil 2:15; Gal 4:28). So, too, in Rom 9:11-12 Paul argues that God’s election is not “by works but by him who calls.” Elsewhere in Paul works are a soteriological issue (Rom 3:20, 27-28; 4:2, 6; 9:32; 11:6; Gal 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10; Eph 2:9; 2 Tim 1:9; Tit 3:5). In the same way, calling in Paul relates most often to the call to salvation (e.g. 1 Cor 1:9; Gal 1:6, 15; 5:8; 1 Thess 2:12; 4:7; 5:24).¹⁸

Contrary to ‘Abrahamic election’, the actual message of the passage is that “not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children.” (Rom 9:6f.) Isaac was chosen, not Ishmael, and Jacob but not Esau. And God elected “before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad – in order that God’s purpose in election might stand.” (Rom 9:11)

Again, apart from the exegetical there remains the logical question. How can a corporate entity be elected without the election of individuals? Without individuals one cannot have a group, thus corporate election cannot exist without individual election. The idea of ‘corporate election’ that either serves as a vessel for salvation or relates merely to the historical destiny of Israel is misleading.¹⁹

Individual election as taught in Romans 8:28-39 actually sets the stage for Paul’s teachings about Israel. Individuals are effectually called and therefore justified, and because it is God who acts upon them, the elect are secure. “Seventeen hostile

¹⁸ Thomas R. Schreiner, “Corporate and Individual Election in Romans 9: A Response to Brian Abasciano,” *Evangelical Theological Society* [home-page online], available from <<http://www.monergism.com/>> (accessed 18 December 2008), 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8; Daniel B. Wallace, “Corporate Election.”

and destructive things are listed and none of them (nor all of them together) can separate the elect (Rom 8:33; “the called” Rom 8:28) from the love of Christ.”²⁰ But, the reader asks, if Paul so far argued that salvation is given even to the Gentile believers, what about the promises to Israel? This question leads to the chapters 9-11 of Romans, and “it is not as though God’s word had failed.” (Rom 9:6)

It may be added here that “foreknowledge” in Rom 8:29 is not to be understood as impersonal foresight but as relational, saving knowledge.²¹ (cf. 1 Cor 8:3; Gal 4:9) Moreover, the “five golden links are welded together in one unbreakable chain.”²² Those God foreknew he also saved, *not* separated into believers and unbelievers. However, still deeper study is beyond the scope of this work. It remains to be said that there are more Pauline (e.g. 2 Thess 2:13) and non-Pauline verses (e.g. John 6:37.65; Acts 13:48) teaching election. In any case it cannot be claimed that the Bible nowhere supports unconditional election, as Streitenberger does.²³

²⁰ W.A. Elwell, “Election and Predestination,” 226.

²¹ W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity, 1994), 676.

²² Warfield cited by Loraine Boettner, “Unconditional Election,” *The Highway* [home-page online], available from <http://www.the-highway.com/election_Boettner.html>; Internet (accessed 28 November 2008), sec. 2.

²³ Peter Streitenberger, *Die Fünf Punkte des Calvinismus*, 40f.

3. Systematic Theology

a. Doctrine of Grace

Election as a sovereign act of grace is actually *necessary* for salvation. Since the Fall, man is depraved and for this reason always chooses *against* God and the gospel. In this sense his will is in bondage. That does not mean that man makes no moral choices, that he is not responsible²⁴ for his actions or that he never gets an opportunity to believe, but it means that he is *naturally opposed to God*. As Storms put it, “The term *depravity* refers to the moral disposition or inclination of fallen man’s nature toward evil and against good. ... Nothing compels him to sin. He sins because he loves it.”²⁵ If God saves man nonetheless, it is truly by grace.

The doctrines of sin, of man and of God must be properly related to each other in order to understand the doctrine of election. Then, “if the doctrine of Total Inability or Original Sin be admitted, the doctrine of unconditional Election follows by the most inescapable logic.”²⁶ Though man is utterly sinful and in rebellion against God, Christ died for the sinner to save him. (Rom 5:8) Salvation by grace alone requires unconditional election through a sovereign act of God. There is nothing inherently good in man (Rom 3:10ff.), which means that neither can he meet any conditions, nor

²⁴ Cf. D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspective in Tension* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2002).

²⁵ Sam Storms, „Divine Election: Freedom and Depravity - Part I.”

²⁶ Loraine Boettner, “Unconditional Election,” sec. 3.

can he come – is he willing to come – to God but God has to draw him. (cf. Jn 6:44)

In light of anthropology and the doctrine of sin, “The marvel of marvels is not that God, in His infinite love and justice, has not elected all of this guilty race to be saved, but that He has elected any.”²⁷ Election of the sinner is grace.

Thus man is not in a neutral position before God. If sinners receive grace, it is unmerited. But if sinners suffer punishment, it is *not* unmerited. Storms teaches even more clearly: “*It is not simply that we do not deserve grace: we do deserve hell!*”²⁸ Man does not have any right to receive grace. As Paul writes, “Who are you, O man, to talk back to God?” (Rom 9:20) Man has to be sure of his position before his creator. He is depraved, sinful and lost, “dead in his sins.” (Eph 2:1) But for the praise of his glorious grace, God has elected sinners to be saved. (Eph 1:4-6)

Arminians, in distinction, actually do agree that man needs grace to be saved, but for the sake of what they conceive as justice or fairness they promote the concept of ‘prevenient’ grace that is given equally to everyone. Now if two twin brothers get the same grace but one decides to believe in the gospel and the other one does not, what makes the difference if not electing grace? The difference must then be found in the hearts of the brothers, again, in opposition to the teachings.²⁹

²⁷ Loraine Boettner, “Unconditional Election,” sec. 3.

²⁸ Sam Storms, „Divine Election: Grace - Part I.”

²⁹ Cf. id., „Divine Election: Grace - Part II.”

b. Doctrine of Love

The doctrine of election is frequently counter-argued with the doctrine of love.

If God chose only some but not all people, how can it be maintained that God is love?

But, as Luther remarked, it is surely God's universal love and also his will that all people should be saved (1 Tim 2:4; Ezk 18:23), but this does not prove that man has a free will to save himself.³⁰ Secondly, Scripture distinguishes between God's moral will (i.e. 'will of command') and his sovereign will (i.e. 'will of decree').³¹

For example, God's nature and will is opposed to sin, yet he often decreed that a sinful act comes to pass as shown by the supreme example of Christ's crucifixion. (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; cf. Rev 17:16f.; Ex 4:21; Deut 2:30; Josh 11:19f.; Rom 11:7-9; Mk 4:11f.) Sin is a reality that God deals with in his wisdom and justice. Whereas he does *not* desire the death of the wicked (Ezk 18:23), he *did* desire the death of the sons of Eli. (1 Sam 2:25; cf. Deut 28:63) His universal love notwithstanding, God's will is sovereign including the matter of evil. (Am 3:6; Is 45:7; Lam 3:37f.) At the end, "God's will to save all people is restraint by his commitment to the glorification of his sovereign grace."³² (Eph 1:6.12.14; Rom 9:22f.)

³⁰ Martin Luther, "The Bondage of the Will," in *Documents from the History of Lutheranism*, ed. E. Lund (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 49.

³¹ John Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God?," *Desiring God* [home-page online], available from <http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Articles/ByDate/1995/1580_Are_There_Two_Wills_in_God/>; Internet (accessed 11/28/2008).

³² John Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God?"

Critical questions such as Hunt's *What Love Is This?* have long before been addressed by Carson in his book titled *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*.³³

The teachings cannot be confined to his universal love towards the world. (Jn 3:16)

“If the love of God is exclusively portrayed as an inviting, yearning, sinner-seeking, rather lovesick passion, we may strengthen the hands of Arminians, semi-Pelagians,

Pelagians, and those more interested in God's inner emotional life than in his justice and glory, but the cost will be massive.”³⁴ It is a mere superficial cliché that ‘God

hates the sin but loves the sinner’. His wrath is upon both the sin and the sinner (Rom 1:18ff.; Jn 3:36; Eph 2:3) unless propitiated by the blood of Christ, which is the only

way that the sinner shall be saved from God's wrath. (Rom 3:25; 5:9)

The sacrificial death of Christ shows that God's love is stronger than his wrath,

but this does not mean that his love and wrath are mutually exclusive. Neither does

God's universal love exclude the doctrine of God's special love for the elect. (Rom

9:13; Eph 5:25) Christ *potentially* died “for the sins of the whole world” (1 Jn 2:2),

but he *effectively* died only for the elect. (Mt 1:21; Jn 17:9; Eph 5:25; Tit 2:14) Only

through a proper understanding of God's love together with his sovereignty we may

grasp something about the counsel of God that includes election.

³³ D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2000).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

4. Conclusion

The doctrine of election is important for us today for two reasons. The first is that God does not like boasting. We have to teach and accept that no one can boast in his salvation, but only in the Lord. (1 Cor. 1:26-31; Gal. 1:15; Eph. 1:3-12) Moreover, God does not like boasting even about our works. Packer gives a timely message:

While we must always remember that it is our responsibility to proclaim salvation, we must never forget that it is God who saves. It is God who brings men and women under the sound of the gospel, and it is God who brings them to faith in Christ. Our evangelistic work is the instrument that He uses for this purpose, but the power that saves is not in the instrument: it is in the hand of the One who uses the instrument. We must not at any stage forget that. For if we forget that it is God's prerogative to give results when the gospel is preached, we shall start to think that it is our responsibility to secure them. And if we forget that only God can give faith, we shall start to think that the making of converts depends, in the last analysis, not on God, but on us, and that the decisive factor is the way in which we evangelize.³⁵

Packer mentions the second reason – the doctrine of eternal security. (Jn 6:39; 10:28; 17:12; 18:9; cf. Phil 1:6) Without the doctrine of election we cannot rest in eternal security. If man is free to believe, logic requires that he remains free to stop believing. Jesus' intercession is constrained by our free will until the end. Whenever teachers like Hunt refute Calvin but maintain eternal security, they pull out the tree while still reaping its fruits. Election and eternal security are intertwined.

³⁵ J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1961), 27.

The doctrine remains a difficult subject because we enter the depth of God's counsel. As a Pastor once said, "If you haven't struggled with Romans 9, you don't understand it." Paul himself ends his passage about election with a doxology about the unsearchable riches of God's wisdom. (Rom 11:33-36) Election is not by chance or arbitrarily, but according to God's secret will. On the earthly level, however, man simply hears the gospel and believes in Christ (or not). To end with Calvin,

That we may make a short conclusion of this matter, let us see in what manner we ought to keep ourselves. When we inquire about our salvation, we must not begin to say, Are we chosen? No, we can never climb so high; we shall be confounded a thousand times, and have our eyes dazzled, before we can come to God's counsel. ... We must always come to our Lord Jesus Christ, when we talk of our election; for without Him, we cannot come nigh to God.³⁶

³⁶ John Calvin, "The Doctrine of Election," *Soli Deo Gloria* [home-page online], available from <http://www.lgmarshall.org/Calvin/calvin_varsermon23.html>; Internet (accessed 28 November 2008).

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