

# Misunderstandings of the Doctrine of Election

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## 1. Election Is Not Fatalistic or Mechanistic.

Sometimes those who object to the doctrine of election say that it is "fatalism" or that it presents a "mechanistic system" for the universe. Two somewhat different objections are involved here. By "fatalism" is meant a system in which human choices and human decisions really do not make any difference. In fatalism, no matter what we do, things are going to turn out as they have been previously ordained. Therefore, it is futile to attempt to influence the outcome of events or the outcome of our lives by putting forth any effort or making any significant choices, because these will not make any difference any way. In a true fatalistic system, of course, our humanity is destroyed for our choices really mean nothing, and the motivation for moral accountability is removed.

In a mechanistic system the picture is one of an impersonal universe in which all things that happen have been inflexibly determined by an impersonal force long ago, and the universe functions in a mechanical way so that human beings are more like machines or robots than genuine persons. Here also genuine human personality would be reduced to the level of a machine that simply functions in accordance with predetermined plans and in response to predetermined causes and influences.

By contrast to the mechanistic picture, the New Testament presents the entire outworking of our salvation as something brought about by a *personal* God in relationship with *personal* creatures. God "destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ" (Eph. 1:5). God's act of election was neither impersonal nor mechanistic, but was permeated with personal love for those whom he chose. Moreover, the personal care of God for his creatures, even those who rebel against him, is seen clearly in God's plea through Ezekiel, "As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his evil way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezek. 33:11).

When talking about our response to the gospel offer, Scripture continually views us not as mechanistic creatures or robots, but as genuine persons, personal creatures who make willing choices to accept or reject the gospel. Jesus invites everyone, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). And we read the invitation at the end of Revelation: "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let him who hears say, 'Come.' And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price" (Rev. 22:17). This invitation and many others like it are addressed to genuine persons who are capable of hearing the invitation and responding to it by a decision of their wills. Regarding those who will not accept him, Jesus clearly emphasizes their hardness of heart and their stubborn refusal to come to him: "Yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:40). And Jesus cries out in sorrow to the city that had rejected him, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" (Matt. 23:37).

In contrast to the charge of fatalism, we also see a much different picture in the New Testament. Not only do we make willing choices as real persons, but these choices are also real choices because they do affect the course of events in the world. They affect our own lives and they affect the lives and destinies of others. So, "He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (John 3:18). Our personal decisions to believe or not believe in Christ have eternal consequences in our lives, and Scripture is quite willing to talk about our decision to believe or not believe as the factor that decides our eternal destiny.

The implication of this is that we certainly must preach the gospel, and people's eternal destiny hinges on whether we proclaim the gospel or not. Therefore when the Lord one night told Paul, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man shall attack you to harm you; for I have many people in this city" (Acts 18:9-10), Paul did not simply conclude that the "many people" who belong to God would be saved whether he stayed there preaching the gospel or not. Rather, "he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them" (Acts 18:11) - this was longer than Paul stayed in any other city except Ephesus during his three missionary journeys. When Paul was told that God had many elect people in Corinth, he stayed a long time and preached, in order that those elect people might be saved! Paul is quite clear about the fact that unless people preach the gospel others will not be saved:

"But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?" ... "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ." (Rom. 10:14, 17)

Did Paul know before he went to a city who was elected by God for salvation and who was not? No, he did not. That is something that God does not show to us ahead of time. But once people comes to faith in Christ then we can be confident that God had earlier chosen them for salvation. This is exactly Paul's conclusion regarding the Thessalonians; he says that he knows that God chose them because when he preached to them, the gospel came in power and with full conviction: "For we know, brethren beloved by God, that he has chosen you; for our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess. 1:4-5). Far from saying that whatever he did made no difference, and that God's elect would be saved whether he preached or not, Paul endured a life of incredible hardship in order to bring the gospel to those whom God had chosen. At the end of a life filled with suffering he said, "Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain salvation in Christ Jesus with its eternal glory" (1 Tim. 2:10).

## **2. Election Is Not Based on God's Foreknowledge of Our Faith.**

Quite commonly people will agree that God predestines some to be saved, but they will say that he does this by looking into the future and seeing who will believe in Christ and who will not. If he sees that a person is going to come to saving faith, then he will predestine that person to be saved. In this way, it is thought, the ultimate reason why some are saved and some are not lies within the people themselves, not within God. All that God does in his predestining work is to give confirmation to the decision he knows people will make on their own. The verse commonly used to support this view is Romans 8:29: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son."

### **a. Foreknowledge of Persons, Not Facts:**

But this verse can hardly be used to demonstrate that God based his predestination on foreknowledge of the fact that a person would believe. The passage speaks rather of the fact that God knew persons ("those whom he foreknew"), not that he knew some fact about them, such as the fact that they would believe. It is a personal, relational knowledge that is spoken of here: God, looking into the future, thought of certain people in saving relationship to him, and in that sense he "knew them" long ago. This is the sense in which Paul can talk about God's "knowing" someone, for example, in 1 Corinthians 8:3: "But if one loves God, one is known by him." Similarly, he says, "but now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God ..." (Gal. 4:9). When people know God in Scripture, or when God knows them, it is personal knowledge that involves a saving relationship. therefore in Romans 8:29, "those whom he foreknew" is best understood to mean, "those whom he long ago thought of in a saving relationship to himself." The text actually says nothing about God foreknowing or foreseeing that certain people would believe, nor is that idea mentioned in any other text of Scripture.

Sometimes people say that God elected groups of people, but not individuals to salvation. In some Arminian views, God just elected the church as a group, while the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) said that God elected Christ, and all people in Christ. But Romans 8:29 talks about certain people whom God foreknew ("those whom he foreknew"), not just undefined or unfilled groups. And in Ephesians Paul talks about certain people whom God chose, including himself: "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). To talk about God choosing a group with no people in it is not biblical election at all. But to talk about God choosing a group of people means that he chose specific individuals who constituted that group.

## **b. Scripture Never Speaks of Our Faith As the Reason God Chose Us:**

In addition, when we look beyond these specific passages that speak of foreknowledge and look at verses that talk about the reason God chose us, we find that Scripture never speaks of our faith or the fact that we would come to believe in Christ as the reason God chose us. In fact, Paul seems explicitly to exclude the consideration of what people would do in life from his understanding of God's choice of Jacob rather than Esau: he says, "Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call, she was told, 'The elder will serve the younger.' As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated'" (Rom. 9:11-13). Nothing that Jacob or Esau would do in life influenced God's decision; it was simply in order that his purpose of election might continue.

When discussing the Jewish people who have come to faith in Christ, Paul says, "So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works" (Rom. 11:5-6). Here again Paul emphasizes God's grace and the complete absence of human merit in the process of election. Someone might object that faith is not viewed as a "work" in Scripture and therefore faith should be excluded from the quotation above ("It is no longer on the basis of works"). Based on this objection, Paul could actually mean, "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, but rather on the basis of whether someone will believe." However, this is unlikely in this context: Paul is not contrasting human faith and human works; he is contrasting God's sovereign choosing of people with any human activity, and he points to God's sovereign will as the ultimate basis for God's choice of the Jews who have come to Christ.

Similarly, when Paul talks about election in Ephesians, there is no mention of any foreknowledge of the fact that we would believe, or any idea that there was anything worthy of meritorious in us (such as a tendency to believe) that was the basis for God's choosing us. Rather, Paul says, "He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:5-6). Now if God's grace is to be praised for election, and not human ability to believe or decision to believe, then once again it is consistent for Paul to mention nothing of human faith but only to mention God's predestining activity, his purpose and will, and his freely given grace.

Again in 2 Timothy, Paul says that God "saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago" (2 Tim. 1:9). Once again God's sovereign purpose is seen as the ultimate reason for our salvation, and Paul connects this with the fact that God gave us grace in Christ Jesus ages ago - another way of speaking of the truth that God freely gave favor to us when he chose us without reference to any foreseen merit or worthiness on our part.

## **c. Election Based on Something Good in Us (Our Faith) Would Be the Beginning of Salvation by Merit:**

Yet another kind of objection can be brought against the idea that God chose us because he foreknew that we would come to faith. If the ultimate determining factor in whether we will be saved or not is our own decision to accept Christ, then we shall be more inclined to think that we deserve some credit for the fact that we were saved: in distinction from other people who continue to reject Christ, we were wise enough in our judgment or capacities to decide to believe in Christ. But once we begin to think this way then we seriously diminish the

glory that is to be given to God for our salvation. We become uncomfortable speaking like Paul who says that God "destined us ... according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace" (Eph. 1:5-6), and we begin to think that God "destined us ... according to the fact that he knew that we would have enough tendencies toward goodness and faith within us that we would believe." When we think like this we begin to sound very much unlike the New Testament when it talks about election or predestination. By contrast, if election is solely based on God's own good pleasure and his sovereign decision to love us in spite of our lack of goodness or merit, then certainly we have a profound sense of appreciation to him for a salvation that is totally undeserved, and we will forever be willing to praise his "glorious grace" (Eph. 1:6).

In the final analysis, the difference between two views of election can be seen in the way they answer a very simple question. Given the fact that in the final analysis some people will choose to accept Christ and some people will not, the question is, "What makes people differ?" That is, what ultimately makes the difference between those who believe and those who do not? If our answer is that it is ultimately based on something God does (namely, his sovereign election of those who would be saved), then we see that salvation at its most foundational level is based on grace alone. On the other hand, if we answer that the ultimate difference between those who are saved and those who are not is because of something in man (that is, a tendency or disposition to believe or not believe), then salvation ultimately depends on a combination of grace plus human ability.

#### **d. Predestination Based on Foreknowledge Still Does Not Give People Free Choice:**

The idea that God's predestination of some to believe is based on foreknowledge of their faith encounters still another problem: upon reflection, this system turns out to give no real freedom to man either. For if God can look into the future and see that person A will come to faith in Christ, and that person B will not come to faith in Christ, then those facts are already fixed, they are already determined. If we assume that God's knowledge of the future is true (which it must be), then it is absolutely certain that person A will believe and person B will not. There is no way that their lives could turn out any differently than this. Therefore it is fair to say that their destinies are still determined, for they could not be otherwise. But by what are these destinies determined? If they are determined by God himself, then we no longer have election based ultimately on foreknowledge of faith, but rather on God's sovereign will. But if these destinies are not determined by God, then who or what determines them? Certainly no Christian would say that there is some powerful being other than God controlling people's destinies. Therefore it seems that the only other possible solution is to say they are determined by some impersonal force, some kind of fate, operative in the universe, making things turn out as they do. But what kind of benefit is this? We have then sacrificed election in love by a personal God for a kind of determinism by an impersonal force and God is no longer to be given the ultimate credit for our salvation.

#### **e. Conclusion: Election is Unconditional:**

It seems best, for the previous four reasons, to reject the idea that election is based on God's foreknowledge of our faith. We conclude instead that the reason for election is simple God's sovereign choice - he "destined us in love to be his sons" (Eph. 1:5). God chose us simply because he decided to bestow his love upon us. It was not because of any foreseen faith or foreseen merit in us.

This understanding of election has traditionally been called "unconditional election." It is "unconditional" because it is not conditioned upon anything that God sees in us that makes us worthy of his choosing us.