

## From Acorn to Oak

*Who is God, and what is he like? Part 19: How does God's Predestination and Election Fit with Human Free Will?*

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We now turn to one of the questions I've been asked most frequently. First let's make sure we understand the terms we're using. Considerable diversity exists among Christians and Christian denominations about how we should most accurately interpret the Bible's use of these and related words. The branch of the historic Christian church that most emphasizes this subject constitutes the Reformed churches consisting of Presbyterian, Reformed, some Congregational and other denominations, so the following definitions come from that branch and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod whose scholars have added significant clarification and understanding to the subject as well. The other churches that refer to these terms, do so with a similar understanding though with nuances as to details.

Predestination is discussed in systematic theology under several categories including the doctrine of God, the doctrine of soteriology (salvation), and in conjunction with the doctrine of ecclesiology (the church). All of these approaches have sound reasons for the discussion in those contexts. Since Reformed theology typically emphasizes this doctrine more than most other traditions, since Reformed theology undertakes the discussion in the context of the decrees of God, and since I am a Reformed theologian, this essay will consider the subject in the context of God's decrees.

In the theological literature on the *decrees of God*, generally the word decree appears in the plural but scholars note there is actually one decree that appears in many particular applications.<sup>1</sup> Berkhof writes, "The decree of God is His eternal plan or purpose, in which He has foreordained all things that come to pass."<sup>2</sup> Hence, in the Reformed tradition the decree means that God has from the beginning determined all that will take place in the future, either by his direction or, in the case of evil and sin, by allowing such to occur but under his control. Many texts are cited as the basis for this belief, including the following from the first chapter of Ephesians.

...[God] made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of

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<sup>1</sup> One theologian who thus explicates the classic Reformed tradition on this subject with lucidity is Louis Berkhof in his *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Printing Company, 1933), pp. 84 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Berkhof, p. 84.

his will,..." (Ephesians 1:9-11 NIV. All Scripture quoted below is from the New International Version unless otherwise designated.)

*Predestination* refers to God's purposes pertaining to his rational, moral, creatures, including all humans, individually and in groups. His predestination concerning the angels is somewhat different; due to the scope of this essay, the focus here will be on human beings. Predestination consists of two aspects: election and reprobation.

*Election* may be defined as "the eternal act of God by which from eternity out of pure grace for Christ's sake He has decreed to bestow those blessings on the Christians which through His call they now enjoy—conversion, justification, sanctification, and preservation in faith."<sup>3</sup> Election is one of what Biblical scholars refer to as a major motif or theme that occurs in many places throughout the whole Bible.

To understand this important doctrine, it is necessary to begin in the Old Testament with the election of God's covenant people, Israel, the beginning of the church. As Joest observes,

In the OT the verb 'elect' (Heb. *bahar*) refers only rarely to the election of a single individual to eternal salvation but usually to God's historical covenant action concerning the people of Israel. God chose this nation in order to establish his covenant with it, he elected it from among all the nations as his own peculiar property (Deut. 14:2). The prophets emphasize that this is an election of grace: It is in no way based on any human excellences of Israel (Amos 9:7; cf. Deut. 7:3-8), but at the same time it obligates the people to offer obedience to God inasmuch as it brings them within the sphere of God's holiness.<sup>4</sup>

We must remember that the Old Testament was the Bible of the New Testament church (2 Timothy 3:14-17), together with the accounts of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Acts, and the letters of Jesus' apostles that were being written and circulated among the churches during the first century A. D. Contrary to the thinking of many people, the God revealed in the Old Testament is the same God who reveals himself in the New Testament, and his covenant with Abraham, which is eternal, (Genesis 17:7) is the same covenant that has been renewed in Christ. (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Galatians 3:26-29; Colossians 2:9-12) The Greek word translated "new" in the term "new covenant" (e.g., in the Septuagint version of Jeremiah 31:31 and in Luke 22:20) is *kainos*, which means new in nature or quality. Jeremiah and Jesus chose to use this word rather than the other main word for "new" in Greek, *neos*, which means new in time or in origin. So the covenant is not completely new, but it has been renewed in Christ. The covenant in the New Testament has continuity with the Old Testament covenant. Thus the church, the visible manifestation of the covenant, has its beginning not at Pentecost but in the covenant with Abraham.

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<sup>3</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 3 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), p. 473-474.

<sup>4</sup> W. Joest (trans.), "Predestination" in *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, ed. Julius Bodensieck (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965), p. 1951.

One key Old Testament text regarding God's election of those who are to be in his covenant is Deuteronomy 7:6-8.

For you are a people holy [meaning set apart] to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Scripture indicates that God also elected certain individuals to be his saved children and heirs of eternal glory. Of the many texts cited is Ephesians 1:3-8:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.

*Reprobation* in Reformed theology typically refers to a decision by God to not elect some people as a punishment for their sinfulness. The fact that he has elected some implies that he has not elected others. In traditional Reformed theology this reprobation has usually been understood as one of the decrees of God whereby some sinners are not saved. The elect will sooner or later come to Christ and experience salvation, but the reprobate will never accept Christ and therefore are condemned.

Those who espouse this interpretation of the Biblical texts strongly argue that God is not at all unjust in his decision to withhold his saving grace from the reprobate. They observe that since all humans are sinful and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23), he would be perfectly just to not save anyone. Further, since he alone is righteous, all-knowing, perfect, and unlimited, who are we with all our limitations, imperfections, and sinfulness to question God's decisions? (Cf. Isaiah 55:8-9; Job 38:2-4 and ff.; Romans 9:20; 11:33-36)

Indeed, every Christian, regardless of whether he or she accepts the Reformed doctrine of reprobation, can and should agree that no human being has the right to try to call God to account for anything. To attempt such folly is not only foolish hubris but thinking and acting from a faulty premise. As we've seen in previous segments in this series, God alone is the Creator and owner of the universe; he can do with what he has created and what he owns as he sees right to do. He alone is perfect as are all his ways. His value is what determines whether something is worthy or not and thus worth saving. God alone is

perfect including totally good, as are all his ways. If I don't understand why God has done something, it is not God who has to change, but I am the one who needs to change. It is perfectly logical to conclude that the limited cannot understand the unlimited; the finite cannot comprehend the infinite. (Isaiah 55:8-9)

If the Bible passages are to be interpreted as teaching this doctrine of reprobation, then surely God was within his right and had, as he still does, the authority to function in this manner. The question, to which we'll return shortly, is whether the Biblical texts quoted to support the Reformed view of reprobation require this interpretation.

The most difficult Biblical passages to interpret, on which the traditional doctrine of reprobation is based, include Romans 9:18-24; 11:7-10; 1 Peter 2:8.

Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? (Romans 9:18-22)<sup>5</sup>

What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written:

"God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day."

And David says:

"May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them." (Romans 11:7-9)

and,

"A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for. (1 Peter 2:8)

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<sup>5</sup> In order to fully understand this passage, it is necessary to also include 9:23, which we will do when we study this passage below.

*Basic Premises to Guide our Interpretation and Other Thinking and Acting*

As indicated above, the Bible teaches God’s sovereignty, predestination, and election. The words are there. We are talking in this essay about the meaning of those terms and the interpretation of the Bible texts. The focus is on *what* God has done and *not* so much on *how* he did it. We will concentrate on trying to understand what the Scripture says and avoid trying to fill in the blanks where our limited and finite ability tries to comprehend God’s unlimited and infinite mind; that’s a pursuit that is not possible, not profitable, and even dangerous. Nevertheless, we should seek to understand what God has led the Biblical writers to include for us to know, act on, and proclaim.

The meaning of the Biblical teaching about election is one of the most profound questions that has occasioned countless hours of debate and volumes of literature by Biblical scholars, theologians, and others over thousands of years. Fine Christians have taken different sides on this issue, and I respect those who hold to a different position from the one below, even though disagreeing with certain aspects of their thinking. When doing so, such contrasting thought should be undertaken with fear and trembling, great care, and charitably.

The different views on election and reprobation appear to be an example of the “disputable matters” to which the apostle Paul refers in Romans 14:1 ff., where true believers in and followers of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who agree on the core of the faith pertaining to salvation (e.g., John 3:16, 14:6 and Romans 10:9), can interpret some Bible texts that relate to other matters differently. While the matter will likely continue to elude exhaustive and complete treatment at least until the Lord returns, we can draw some conclusions with a high degree of confidence, since they are clear in the Bible.

First of all, we need to begin our attempt to understand how God’s sovereignty, predestination, and election relate to human freedom by attesting to the reality that these concepts are all taught in Scripture. As we’ve seen in the outset of this series, we start in all our reasoning with the premise that the Bible is God’s Word, and it is infallible and without error; it is the standard to which we must subject all our thinking and acting. That is, what we conclude and do must be in accord with God’s Word. If we don’t understand something, we study it until we do, or we acknowledge that though we don’t completely understand, we admit that such inability is perfectly logical, since we are limited and only God is unlimited; as stated earlier, it makes perfect sense that the finite cannot comprehend the infinite. As God says, “my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.” (Isaiah 55:8)

We must seek to interpret a text as the original writers intended. We don’t ask, “What does this verse mean to you?” and allow subjective biases to sway us. It doesn’t matter what the verse means to me; what matters is what it meant to the author who was led to write it by the Holy Spirit. Our task is to find out what it meant to him. We avoid “shoot from the hip theologizing.” We ask, “In its context, and from what we know of the whole

of God’s Word, and informed by trustworthy and respected Bible scholars throughout church history,<sup>6</sup> what did the author of this passage mean by these words?”

Accordingly, I cannot allow my biases to lead me to engage in “Scripture twisting;” i.e., the attempt to force my bias to try to make a text say what I want it to say. Especially when I arrive at an understanding of what I think the text means, I must subject that interpretation to the rest of the Bible, to see if other Scripture refutes my understanding. I must also subject my thinking to other scholarship in the Biblical and theological literature to see if my idea holds up there too. Further, I need to invite the critical analysis and any corrective feedback of those older and who may be wiser and have knowledge and insights I don’t presently have, as well as presenting my thinking to a peer review, where other scholars can critique my position and either affirm that position or challenge me to make any necessary changes.

We must also operate on the premise that nothing in Scripture is contradictory. The Bible is God’s Word, and God does not contradict himself. The few texts in Scripture that appear to be contradictory are resolved when properly interpreted. I know of no Bible passage in the original languages that when studied and correctly understood still appears to contradict another. Further, in the light of Isaiah 55:8 and related passages, we cannot allow our human hubris and arrogance to declare God’s Word inadequate in any way. We need to approach God’s Word with Christ-like humility, remembering who we are. We are not God’s peer; he has no peers, and he is accountable to no one. If I don’t

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<sup>6</sup> Part of this treasure trove of trustworthy and respected Bible interpretation is found in the historic Christian systematic theology that has stood the test of time and is found in the theological heritage of the historic church traditions. Here is where the “Magisterium” of our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters offers much help that our Balkanized Protestant denominations lack. When Catholics have such questions they can turn to the Magisterium and obtain the authorized explanation that has been hammered out over centuries of brilliant scholarship that has been approved by the official church leadership and been upheld for millennia. I observe that while most of the theology in all true Christian denominations is consistent with the Bible, especially the core nonnegotiable doctrines, each denomination has some theological distinctives that are hard to square with Scripture. To the extent that these distinctives lie within the parameters which Paul called “disputable matters” (Romans 14:1), i.e., non-core beliefs on which true Christians can disagree, largely due to interpreting certain Bible texts differently, we should treat each other charitably and work together to accomplish the Lord’s work to which he has called us. In so doing we should not downplay and ignore theological differences, but we should keep them in this perspective and continue the discussion, with one another speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), and doing so treating each other as brothers in sisters in Christ with a common calling to preach and teach the Gospel of Christ Jesus, the Good News of how God is reconciling the world to himself in and through Jesus our only Savior and Lord. Our fellow Christians in other denominations are not our enemy; we know who the enemy is: the devil, his demonic followers, and their human counterparts who reject Jesus Christ. (Matthew 13:39; Luke 10:19; 1 Timothy 5:14; James 4:4) As Christians have confessed for most of two thousand years in the words of the historic Nicene Creed, the church is “one, holy, catholic [universal], and apostolic.” Let us show to the world our oneness in Christ for which he prayed. (John 17:11) This oneness doesn’t mean total agreement on every matter. It does mean obeying our Lord’s command to love our fellow believers so all people will know we are Jesus’ disciples. (John 13:34-35) The New Testament Greek word for love, *agape*, is defined by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, and includes being patient and kind, and not envious, boastful, proud, rude, self-seeking, easily angered, or keeping records of wrongs. Just as the members of human families don’t all agree with one another on some issues, but they love one another, so most reasonable people don’t expect all the members of the church to agree on everything. Nevertheless, they are watching carefully to see how we relate to and treat one another. (1 Peter 2:12)

understand something, I cannot logically conclude that God’s Word needs to be changed; I’m the one who has to change my thinking. I can’t try to change the Word through historical or Scriptural revisionism or by any other means, e.g., by such “Scripture twisting” as redefining terms and specious casuistry. The Old Testament Word that Jesus affirmed (e.g., Matthew 5:17-19), and the New Testament written by eyewitnesses of Jesus’ teaching, mighty acts, and special revelation (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:1-8), are our true and our highest authority, our standard, because all the authors were called and inspired (*theopneustos*; literally, God-breathed) by God to write what he led them to reveal. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

### *God’s Election of People and Human Free Will*

We must agree that God could have predestined people to make the choices they do and things to occur as they do, except for sin and evil, especially regarding faith and unbelief, election and reprobation, what is called double predestination, as John Calvin taught. Of course, Calvin also takes pains to make sure people understand that God is not the author of human sinfulness. As the owner of a company has the right to say what will take place in his or her company, the Owner of the universe has the right to say what he wants to occur throughout his creation and to make sure it does. However, the question is, did he do so by predestinating everything to occur as it is, excepting specific sins and evil deeds?

The various answers to that question can be roughly grouped into at least four basic classifications which lie more on an underlying continuum than being completely discrete categories. The continuum may be described as views of God’s will and human freedom.

Views of God’s Will and Human Freedom			
Hyper-Calvinist	Calvinist	Some Lutheran Modified Calvinist	Arminian

The so-called hyper-Calvinists (following and going beyond what the Reformation theologian and pastor, John Calvin [1509-1564], held) believe God did just that kind of predestinating of people’s behavior, except for the sins they commit. Some even go so far as to eliminate real human freedom and postulate that God has decreed everything that occurs. They hold that God has made it appear that humans have freedom, but that is not actually so. They reason that a human being’s ability to do something to contradict God’s will, would be to reduce God’s sovereignty.

You may have heard of the famous joke about the Calvinist who fell down a long flight of stairs. Predestined for the fall but without injury, he picked himself up, wiped his brow, and said, “Whew. I’m glad that’s over!”

The thought that humans could ever do anything to reduce the sovereignty of God is flawed with an errant understanding of God's characteristics and the limitations of mankind. As I will indicate below, the view that humans have a degree of freedom rather enhances one's understanding of God's sovereignty. That God is still sovereign in spite of human freedom increases our awe of God.

Furthermore, does the concept that God would create human beings with the mistaken impression that they have genuine free will when they actually don't, fit with what we read throughout the Bible regarding the character of God? Is there a disconnect between this view of God and the teaching of the Bible that God, including his will, is authentic, genuine, true, and perfect? Nowhere in Scripture do we see God misleading his people. Does such a view that humans do not have genuine freedom fit with the requirements throughout the Bible that people obey God's commands? If they don't have true free will, and if God has preordained everything, then the commands are unnecessary, except to form a false impression, which is antithetical to God's character, as we've studied in earlier segments of this series on the practical implications of historic Christian systematic theology.

We read in God's Word that he created mankind in his image. (Genesis 1:26-28) Theologians typically explain bearing God's image as meaning that humans have some of God's characteristics in microcosm that he has in macrocosm. For example, as God is love to the core of his being, (1 John 4:8) we also have the capacity of loving; as God has complete knowledge, he has given us the capacity to have some knowledge, but nowhere as great as his own which is omniscient; (Isaiah 55:8-9) and as God is free to do what he wills, (Job 42:2; Isaiah 55:11; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12) he has given us freewill, but within limits.

Further, does not human freedom enhance God's joy? As Jesus said, "I tell you..., there will be *more* joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." (Luke 15:7 NASB) By way of an analogy, if you are a parent, are you not much more pleased when your child obeys you willingly than if he or she is forced to do so reluctantly and involuntarily?

Next toward, but not at, the center of the continuum is the view of Calvin that God has elected some to salvation but has passed by others and thus decreed that they will not be saved. Calvin's position is the basis of most Reformed thinking about the subject of election and reprobation, a double predestination.

On the other end of the continuum, the most frequently held view in opposition to the commonly held Calvinist position, typically referred to as Arminian (from the Dutch theologian, Jacobus Arminius [1560-1609]), places an inordinate degree of freedom in the capabilities of human beings. Such thinking holds, e.g., that the human will is one of the causes of regeneration. Arminians also believe that faith is a good work and one of the bases of God's acceptance. The logical conclusion of their thinking, which they also admit, is that a believer cannot have assurance of his or her salvation in this lifetime.

These concepts conflict with Biblical teaching (e.g., Ephesians 2:8-10, Romans 10:9, John 6:37-40; Philippians 1:6; 1 John 3:9).

As a result of the above and for the following reasons, in trying to understand how to answer the question before us, I lean toward what has been called the moderate Calvinist view or the modified Calvinist position,<sup>7</sup> a version of which draws upon insightful Lutheran exegesis and is similar to the Lutheran position, which avoids the view of “predestination to damnation while teaching an election to salvation.”<sup>8</sup> Calvinists and Lutherans correctly see the Bible as clearly teaching the sovereignty of God. (Genesis 17:1; Job 38-39 and 42:2; Ephesians 1:11; and Revelation 4:11 among many other passages) Yet the Bible also indicates that humans are made in God’s image. (Genesis 1:26-31) That image involves the freedom to choose. (Genesis 2:15-17) Throughout the Bible God’s commands are issued with the clear assumption that (even the now fallen) human beings are free to obey or not obey; if people could not obey God’s commands, he would neither be giving them nor requiring their obedience. The concept that such freedom is not real and only illusory, as hyper-Calvinists hold, seems forced, specious, and disingenuous. Talk about something not in God’s character!

The hyper-Calvinists have further difficulties. If mankind is not free, and was “set up” to sin, it strains logic to make humans truly responsible for daily sins. Moreover, though they deny it, it is difficult to escape the charge that this view makes God the author of sin, which by definition cannot be so. It is true that we cannot base our theology on human reason, which is influenced by sin. Nevertheless, God calls us to employ our reason (e.g., Isaiah 1:18) which implies it is useful, and, based on the Bible, it can grasp truth. Further the Holy Spirit guides believers (using our reason) into all truth. (John 16:13) We cannot understand everything (Isaiah 55:8-9), but we can understand what we need to know.

We can agree with Calvin that sin is so powerful that human beings, both regenerated, that is those who have been given the new nature by the Holy Spirit, and unregenerated, are not free not to sin. To put it in terms without the double negative, we can avoid some sins, but we cannot avoid sinning in general; i.e., between now and the time we die or the Lord returns, we will likely sin. Only Jesus led a sinless life. (Hebrews 4:14-15; 7:27; 9:14) Human beings since the fall of Adam and Eve have lost the freedom to always avoid sinning, and we are not by ourselves able to lead lives fit for fellowship with God who is most holy. Salvation cannot be earned, contrary to the teaching of all other religions and religious systems. Both those of us who are regenerated, by God’s special grace in Christ, and the unregenerated, with the help of God’s common grace, can avoid certain sins at certain times, and even certain sins all the time, but not all sins all the time.

Further, even the new nature of those of us who are regenerated still struggles with remnants of the old nature (e.g., Romans 7:13-24) that entice us to sin, which we usually freely choose. This text, that realistically reveals our thoroughly sinful nature, answers and relieves our deep concern with many of our most profound questions about ourselves,

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<sup>7</sup> T.C. Hammond, *In Understanding Be Men* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1961), pp. 92 and 97),

<sup>8</sup> Pieper, p. 495.

such as how we, who sincerely believe in and love the Lord Jesus Christ, indeed the whole triune God, can still have the horrible thoughts we sometimes do. In that explanation, we can understand the truest and most helpful psychology that relieves us of the torment that even questions our salvation, such as “How can I love the Lord and be trying to obey him and still have such horrible thoughts, and do such terrible deeds that I despise? Is there something wrong with me? Am I not saved, or am I psychologically ill?” The answer to these last two questions is No, and the following paragraphs explain why. The answer to the first question, is revealed as the apostle Paul himself honestly and openly shares his similar struggle. Be sure to read the whole of Romans 7 and 8 for the fullest understanding of this matter. Don’t miss 8:1-2, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, <sup>2</sup>because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.”

This text in Romans 7 indicates how our thoroughly sinful nature, still results in corrupt thoughts and deeds, some of which we fight against and immediately reject. Of course, indulging evil thoughts is itself sinful. See, e.g., Matthew 5:27-28, where we read Jesus saying, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ <sup>28</sup>But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Commenting on 7:14, the careful Lutheran Greek scholar, Lenski, explains Paul’s (and our) struggle this way.

14) When the apostle now continues the narration of his personal experience with the law by changing from the historical tenses of past time to present tenses in v. 14-23, is he still speaking of his former unregenerate [unborn again] state, or is he now speaking of his experience after his regeneration [after receiving the new birth, see John 3:16]? The history of the exegesis of this section is highly instructive. The older Greek fathers thought that Paul continues to speak of his unregenerate state. Augustine thought likewise until the controversy with Pelagius<sup>9</sup> opened his eyes. Due to their semi-Pelagianism the Romanists followed the Greek fathers. The Reformers followed the later view of Augustine and deepened it. Due to their view of holiness the Pietists followed the old Greek fathers and thus, as in other respects, prepared the way for the moralizing rationalists. The descendants of the latter, like the later Romanists and the Pietists, adhere to this view. Our Confessions quote this section repeatedly as proof for the doctrine that the flesh still adheres to the regenerate, and the best, later commentators fully agree with this view.

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<sup>9</sup> Pelagius was a monk from Britain who taught in Rome in the early fifth century AD that everyone can live free from sin if he or she will, that there is no inherited inclination within human nature to do evil, that original sin does not exist (that every infant is born in the same condition as Adam was before the Fall), and that many pagans and Jews have lived a perfect life. Australian theologian, David Knox, explains that “Pelagianism knows nothing of redemption. ‘By his free will man is emancipated from God.’ This statement of Julian [of Eclanum, a disciple of Pelagius] is the key to Pelagianism, which is rationalized moralism. Man created with free will has no longer to do with God but with himself alone. God only re-enters at the last judgment.” David Broughton Knox, “Pelagianism,” *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, Eds. Everett F. Harrison, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1960), p. 400.

"Nevertheless the old Adam clings to them (the believers) still in their nature and all its internal and external powers. Of this the apostle has written in Rom. 7:18, etc."—"And in Christians this repentance continues till death, because through the entire life it contends with sin remaining in the flesh, as Paul, Rom. 7:14-25 testifies that he 'wars with the law in his members,' etc."... All Pelagians and all semi-Pelagians (and they include all who minimize sin's corruption), who find some measure of good left in fallen man, must eliminate whatever contradicts this view. On the other hand, all Pietists (and this includes all perfectionists and all holiness sects), who elevate personal sanctification above justification, do the same. They cannot admit that a man like Paul still battles with his flesh and his sin. As for rationalists, from the days of their exegete Paulus onward, they plainly show that they do not understand either a miracle or anything like a personal experience of grace. There are a few who straddle the question which divides the commentators by saying that the tenses must not be stressed, that "technical terms such as regeneration" must not be introduced, that Paul himself leaves them out. But this does not solve the problem.

All men who have had no experience of regeneration, and most of those whose experience is pathological will not understand Paul, and we should not expect this of them. While Paul elaborates, what he says agrees with all else that the Scriptures say regarding the flesh [the sinful nature] that is still left in us after conversion and regeneration. It has been well pointed out that he who wrote I John 3:9, and 5:18, first wrote II John 1:8 and carefully included himself.

**For I know that the law is spiritual, but I am made of flesh, having been sold under the sin. For what I am working out I do not acknowledge; for not what I will that do I practice; but what I hate that I perform. But if what I do not will, that I perform, I consent to the law that it is excellent. Moreover, now no longer do I myself work it out but the sin that dwells in me.**

Let it at once be said that this entire chapter with all its self-analysis is written from the standpoint of a regenerate man, whose experience is normal and not pathological. This is highly important because so many have false views about conversion and regeneration with the result that their own self-analysis is not normal even as their experience itself is abnormal, and that these persuade others to accept their pathological views and experience because they regard them to be sound and healthy....

[Paul's] self-analysis is correct, for in what would or could fleshly quality inhere except in flesh and fleshy substance? This, too, shows that he is now speaking of his regenerate state even as the present tenses now begin. There would be no point in saying that in his unregenerate state he was *sarkinos* [fleshly, made of flesh, i.e., the sinful nature], for, of course, in that state he was nothing but flesh. The important point is that even now,

in his regenerate state, he has flesh. He does not say that now, too, he is nothing but flesh and fleshy; for in v. 17 he says, “in me, that is in my flesh,” i.e., not in me as a whole and altogether but only in that part of me which is still flesh....“Fleshy,” which includes the idea of “flesh” (not of blood!) is to be understood ethically exactly as is “spiritual”; it is the old man, the old nature, that is still in us after our conversion. As a Christian, Paul is not wholly rid of his flesh, and that is what causes this entire conflict with the spiritual law of God, which he would obey in all things but finds himself hampered in obeying by the presence of his flesh. This is the daily experience of all of us.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, we are all sinful and fall short of the glory of God; we commit sins. (Romans 3:23) We are, therefore, accountable for our sinful nature and for the misuse of our freedom when we do commit a sin. Such sinning not only offends the person(s) against whom it is done, but far more it offends God, who is most holy and who loves also the one(s) we’ve hurt with the sin.

One of the greatest textual difficulties with the hyper-Calvinist and Calvinist views of predestination are the Biblical texts which state that God wants all people to be saved. (E.g., 1 Timothy 2:4). Calvin and others interpret the context of 1 Timothy 2:4 as applying to classes of people, such as kings and magistrates, meaning that God wants people from all segments of society to be saved, not all persons. Calvin concludes, “By this Paul surely means only that God has not closed the way unto salvation to any order of men; rather, he has so poured out his mercy that he would have none without it.”<sup>11</sup> Yet, that seems forced when the whole passage is carefully considered. Observe that the last sentences of the preceding chapter have been addressing individuals, specifically Timothy, but then also Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom Paul, led by the Holy Spirit, says he has “handed over to Satan.” Notice that he does not add “as God has done from before creation” (in the sense of supralapsarian, i.e. before the fall of Adam and Eve) or “since the fall” (what is called infralapsarian), but Paul led by the Spirit does say “to be taught not to blaspheme.” (1 Timothy 1:18-20)<sup>12</sup> Chapter two follows beginning with a reference to “everyone” (literally “all men” in the Greek), and except for the reference in the next verse to “kings and all those in authority,” the rest of the chapter speaks of people in general.

In 2 Peter 3:9, God says through the apostle that he is “patient...not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” The word “patient” in the Greek is “*makrothumei*,” (long-suffering). Calvin interprets the last clause as referring to those

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<sup>10</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *New Testament Commentary – The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 473-477. WORDsearch.

<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Vol. XXI), Ed. John T. McNeill, Trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 984.

<sup>12</sup> Compare what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 5:5 that the immoral man to which he was referring should be handed “over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord;” i.e., that he would come to his senses and make the changes he should make in God’s sight. Recall Ezekiel 18:21, “...if a wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die.”

who've been elected, but it is a stretch to hold that this text could not be interpreted in the modified Calvinist understanding. As Pieper points out, "the Apostle clearly says that God endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath [in Romans 9:22], but does not say that He made them vessels of wrath."<sup>13</sup>

The modified Calvinist position still maintains God's sovereignty but allows as well for a human freedom to choose within limits. Far from reducing God's sovereignty, I believe this view enhances His sovereignty! Does it not take more power and sovereignty to construct a world in which God remains in control and yet allows true though limited freedom while guiding all aspects of creation to arrive at His predetermined end or purpose?

An illustration I often give in my classes in this regard is a father who places, e.g., bowls of mango ice cream on a coffee table right next to bowls of chocolate brownies. He tells his children that they may choose either the ice cream or the brownies, but not both. The children have genuine freedom; they may have either one. The father knows exactly which one each child will consume, but the freedom to choose, which is a truly free choice, is still limited by the items selected by the father. Though the father, knowing intimately each of his children, is certain ahead of time which choice will be made, his knowledge does not determine the choice; each child him or herself makes the selection he or she truly desires.

Romans 8:29, 30 do speak of God's foreknowledge being linked with election. "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified." Many people, especially those influenced by the Arminian viewpoint, like to say that God elected people whom he foreknew would accept his saving grace. That could be true, but this text does not say so; it only says that God foreknew the people he was electing. Calvin, Luther, and others are deeply concerned that the interpretation of God's foreknowing who would believe should not be understood as the basis for his decision to elect them and thus introduce a works righteousness in the election.

The concern with the concept of foreknowledge of human agreement is twofold. First, if God elects a human on the basis of his or her positive response to believe, that could introduce a faulty view of what is called synergism (from two Greek words meaning literally to work together) and could, depending on the details of that viewpoint regarding God's foreknowledge, be construed to be an act of merit on the believer's part and that his or her faith is to a degree at least earned. That view conflicts with the Biblical and historic Christian theology that salvation is always by God's grace; humans have done, and cannot do, anything to earn God's favor. Rather, as *The Heidelberg Catechism* says, "We increase our debt each day."<sup>14</sup> Throughout the Bible God reveals himself as acting in love. He elects in love. Synergism viewed as human initiative apart from God's grace

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<sup>13</sup> Pieper, p. 498.

<sup>14</sup> Allen O. Miller and M. Eugene Osterhaven, Trans., *The Heidelberg Catechism* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1962), p. 21.

also takes away from God's glory by portraying election and salvation as something other than God's doing.

Second, if election is credited to human action, then works righteousness raises the question of how much is enough? All other religions are autosoteristic (from the Greek words, *auto*: self + *soter*: salvation) where each has a different prescription for how humans are to act in order to obtain that religion's view of the highest end. Only Biblical Christianity teaches that salvation is by God's grace alone. As former adherents of other religions, who have now become Christians, readily testify, they have a huge relief in Christ since they do not have to earn their own salvation. Any synergistic element in the doctrine of election where a human act is considered a righteous work leading to election would effectively remove the assurance of one's election and salvation and introduce an element of uncertainty and burden. That is neither the teaching of the Bible nor the will of God for his people.

Yet we need to be very careful in our attention to God's Word on this matter (as well as in all others!). The text before us says, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose." (Romans 8:28 NASB) In the Greek the verb translated "work together" is *sunergei* (literally "he works together" and is in the active voice, the antecedent, and subject, of "he" being God). As you've probably already observed, *sunergei* is the basis of the English term, synergism. But how are we to understand this? Romans 8:28 is commonly quoted, and rightly so, by Christians as a means of comforting themselves and others during challenging times. Yet the primary reference to these two verses before us is with respect to the subject of predestination and salvation. The text says there is a synergistic operation taking place, but upon closer look what is being said is not Arminian.

God is still doing the primary action; throughout it all he is sovereign. We read "he works together" the "all things," bringing them together to cause them to work for good to those who love God and who are called according to his purpose. In historic Christian theology, the call of God is seen as two-fold: an external call, whereby a human being hears a proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and becomes aware of God's Word, and an internal call (also termed the "effectual call"), whereby with the help of God the person responds in faith. (1 Corinthians 12:3) Further, it is all for the accomplishment of God's purposes.

The next verse goes on to say "For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren..." (Romans 8:29 NASB) Here we see God doing what we just read in the preceding verse for those whom he foreknew who he then predestined to mature into the likeness of his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, thereby being equipped for the accomplishment of God's purposes.

Because God is sovereign he can allow true freedom under his management. Because he loves the people he has created and to whom he has given his image (some of his own characteristics in microcosm), he calls us to work with him in the accomplishment of his

redemptive purposes. He gives us a task to do, but he treats us with dignity as those who bear his very image.

Again, a human analogy is helpful. Have you had to work or serve under a leader who dictated precisely what he or she wanted you to do, set such strict limits that they hindered your functioning, and micromanaged your work? How did you feel about his or her leadership? Have you also had the opportunity to work or serve under a leader who was very sure of his or her authority and competence, communicated effectively what he or she wanted you to accomplish, encouraged you to be innovative, and permitted you to have as much freedom as you needed, albeit within reasonable limits, to use your gifts, knowledge, and skills to accomplish the purpose for which you agreed to sign on with him or her? Under which leader did you accomplish the most? In which context did you have the most joy? Which leader did you like the most?

Then how does God's foreknowledge relate to his election of some but not all? Some say that since God foreknows what people will do, he has thus predestined them to do what they do and will do; therefore, they don't have freedom and are just doing what God has already decreed. A close look at the words for knowing in the Greek and Hebrew indicate a significant aspect of what that foreknowledge mentioned in Romans 8:29 involved. Both the Hebrew and Greek distinguish different types of knowing with different words that are both translated "know" in the English. Hebrew and Greek discern the difference between knowing facts, data, and other information and knowing in an intimate, experiential, relationship.

An example in this very passage of the Greek distinction between these two uses of the word know is in Romans 8:28 and 29, where the original word, *oida* (knowing in the sense of facts and information), is used to translate know in verse 28: "And we know [*oidamen* > *oida*] that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." The next verse begins, "For those God foreknew he also predestined...." In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *yadah*, is the word translated know in the intimate, experiential, relational sense. It is a covenantal word. In the Greek, the word *ginosko*, is the word translated know when used to convey a knowledge based on intimate, experiential, and relational means; *ginosko* is also the word in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament ca. 250 B. C.) that translates *yadah*. It is also the basis of the Greek word, *proegnō* > *proginosko*, which is translated foreknowledge in Romans 8:29.

This is the type of knowledge I was illustrating in my example of the dad offering his children their choice of a bowl of mango ice cream or a bowl of chocolate brownies and knowing which each would take due to their close and intimate relationship. Yet the dad's knowledge of what his children would choose did not force their choices. He allowed the children freedom to choose, within limits (in this case only two choices were made available), but it was a genuine freedom, and since the dad had such an intimate relationship with his children and knew them so well, he knew what their choice would be. He was also in full control of the situation, but the children had all the freedom they needed within that paternal superintendence which assured them of security in his

provision and love for them. He knew for certain what his children would choose, but his knowledge did not constrain the children in their choosing.

Many people think that because God knows everything in the future that means he has predestined every detail. Clearly, as some hyper-Calvinists maintain, God being God has the ability to have planned every detail, except for sin. However, as we read God's Word, does it indicate that he has in fact done so? The assertion that his knowing everything that will take place in the future means that he has predestined it to occur, is not an ipso facto result. God, who is immanent, intimately and thoroughly knows all people. Being transcendent and having complete factual knowledge, he also knows what all people will do eons before they are even alive and in his sovereignty can influence and guide developments to accomplish his purposes.

Recall what David said. "O LORD, you have searched me and you know [*yadah*] me. You know [*yadah*] when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know [*yadah*] it completely, O LORD." (Psalm 139:1-4 NIV)

God has created each person differently. No two of us, not even identical twins, are exactly alike. What we observe is even more profoundly proven with DNA analysis that shows the tiny embryo in utero as having a DNA uniquely different from his or her biological mother and biological father. Even for people who are yet to be born far into the future, God has planned for them the special gifts, abilities, and other characteristics that will enable them to serve him effectively in the temporal context in which he will bring them to life. In his foreknowledge of them and the context in which they will live, can we not understand how and why he would predestine them to his service in his care for the cosmos he loves (John 3:16) in order to accomplish his redemptive purposes?

What are we to make of this foreknowing? That in his intimate knowledge of all people he does take into account how they will respond to his call? Could he do so by an effectual call that attracts those who will function well in key ways in ages to come to desire to serve in his elect? Yes. Did he do it this way? This is a mystery that God has not fully explained in his Word, and what he has not revealed is both beyond our ability to know at least for now and, therefore, not necessary for us to know. It is possible that God has used such knowledge in his electing, but in all likelihood he has not done so in the Arminian sense of synergism. What we can say regarding God's foreknowledge is that we cannot conclude that humans thereby lose real and genuine freedom.

To understand the subject of predestination and its companion concept, election, as much as possible, one has to keep in mind the Old Testament basis of election, which shapes the content of the concept. We are elected to a function, not to a position of prestige, which point the Israelites failed to maintain. Their election became a status in their minds, not a function; they lost sight of their election being a calling to holiness to God to serve him in his redemptive purposes. (Genesis 12:1-3; cf. John 15:16.) In the modified Calvinist position herein presented, in every age a people whom God has elected is present so the church will always exist and continue its witness to reach out to those who

are not in the elect and are not saved and also serve God in other ways. That plan, however, has as its focus the whole of humankind, (1 Timothy 2:4) not that all people will be saved, but so that the message will reach all people and provide the opportunity for them to be saved, to join the elect in God's covenant community, and undertake the mission of the elect to be his task force, his mouthpiece (backed up with action, "walking the talk" [e.g., James 2:24, 26]), to communicate in word and deed God's plan of salvation, i.e., to be his witnesses. (Matthew 28:18-20, Acts 1:8, 1 Peter 3:15)

Referring to himself when he returns in his Second Coming, Jesus said that the Son of Man "will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other." (Matthew 24:31 NIV) The original Greek word translated "elect" that the Lord used in this passage is "*eklektous*," (chosen, elect > the prefix *ek* [out of] + *lego* [here meaning call]). Notice its close association with the Greek word translated "church," which is "*ekklesia*" (> *ek* + *kaleo* [to call]). (Matthew 16:18) The word church thus means those who are called out of the world to be holy to God for his service. The elect are referred to as those who are called out to be holy to God for his service. Thus, here linguistically we see what we've been observing doctrinally taught in the Bible regarding the elect who are equated with the true church.

We must keep in mind that Jesus taught that not all people in the church would be true believers in and followers of him. He warned us that among us would be false prophets.

"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matthew 7:15-23)

John also adds that we must be discerning. "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." (1 John 4:1) Here and in other Bible passages we understand that we cannot say that all in the church are in the elect, but the elect and the true church are the same. Another way of saying it is, "Not all in the church are in the elect, but all the elect are in the church." And those who are in the elect are called by God to be holy to him who has called them out of the world to accomplish his redemptive purposes. The true

church is the main means through which God is accomplishing the redemption of his creation.

Another analogy may help to understand the practice of selecting some people rather than others for special service. Some megachurch choirs employ one or more professional and/or semiprofessional singers for each of the four key voice parts, soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. Most of the choir members in church congregations are volunteers. One characteristic of volunteers, and one of the blessings they have, is that they feel freer to be gone from time to time to engage other needs, responsibilities, and opportunities in their lives. They may be in worship when they are gone on a given Sunday, but the service in which they participate may be 1,000 or more miles away. Their home megachurch still needs a choir that can lead with a high quality of music in the worship service. Therefore, certain members of the choir are paid in order to make sure that at least one strong voice in each of the four main parts is always present, even when, e.g., on a given Sunday all, or all but one or two, of the tenors are on vacation, are on a business trip, are attending to a family emergency, are ill, or are absent for a variety of other reasons. Is that unfair? No, because with payment come requirements that produce the needed and expected accomplishment in the service of God's worship.

Thus, we see that the concept of election is clearly and unmistakably taught in the Bible. That God has elected people for salvation, even "before the creation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4) is uncontested among those who view the Bible as authoritative.

### *Interpreting the Texts that Form the Basis of the Doctrine of Reprobation*

The question which next arises is, "Is this election a double predestination?" That is, if some are elected for salvation, are others, those not elected, precluded from salvation by a decision God made a long time ago, depending on which viewpoint is held, either before the world began, or after the fall, or some other time well before people were even born?

Let's now return to the difficult texts upon which the Calvinists base their view of reprobation. We need to take a closer look at them, especially in the original Greek which discloses key information obscured in the English translation.

Regarding the Romans 9:18-23 passage, we should keep in mind that verses 22-23 are an analogy and are to be understood in the context and light of the main point that Paul articulates in the preceding verses (20-21) that God has the right to do what is right in his sight in his dealings with fallen humans. Francis Pieper insightfully observes that the Greek in Romans 9:22-23 "shows clearly that the election to salvation has no predestination to damnation as its corollary. In two respects the vessels of wrath differ radically from the vessels of mercy."<sup>15</sup>

1. Speaking in verse 23 of "vessels of mercy, which [God] prepared beforehand for glory," (9:23 NASB) the Greek verb for "he prepared beforehand" (*proētoimasen*)

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<sup>15</sup> Pieper, p. 497.

is in the active voice clearly indicating that God is engaged in the selecting of these people for his purposes. In a very significant contrast, when we look at the Greek pertaining to the vessels of wrath having been prepared for destruction, (9:22 NASB) the verb Paul uses for “having been prepared” is (*katērtismena*), and we see it is in the passive voice. Further, as Pieper points out, “there is no mention whatever of any ‘doing’ by God...Here, then, the Apostle clearly says that God endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath, but does not say that He made them vessels of wrath.”<sup>16</sup>

Compare 1 Peter 2:7-8. “Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,’ [Psalm 118:22] and, ‘A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.’ [Isaiah 8:14] They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.”

Again the English verb does not disclose what the Greek verb reveals. The words “were destined for” translate the Greek word ἐτέθησαν which is transliterated *etethēsan*. This Greek verb is in the passive voice, indicating together with the context that those who fall do so because of their disobedience to the Word of God, specifically the Gospel of Christ Jesus, not that God actively predestined them to destruction.

The outstanding Bible commentator, R.C.H. Lenski, further explains, “It is startling to read: ‘for which they also were placed (set, appointed).’ Calvinists explain this as an eternal decree of reprobation, all Scripture to the contrary notwithstanding. They place the action of the verb in the *voluntas antecedens* whereas it belongs in the *voluntas consequens*. The former does not take into account man's reaction to Christ and to the Word...”<sup>17</sup> We will return to this text in 1 Peter 2:7-8 below.

2. We must also observe in the Romans 9:23 text, in the Greek word translated “prepared beforehand” (*proētoimasen*) regarding the “vessels of mercy,” that the prefix *pro*, meaning before, indicates that God’s fitting the vessels of mercy for his purposes was done by him eons ago, “before the foundations of the world.” (Ephesians 1:4) Pieper observes that “the *pro* is missing [in the Greek for “those fitted to destruction”]...Here, then, is taught an eternal preparation for glory or for salvation, but no eternal preparation for destruction.”<sup>18</sup>

Jesus indicates the same distinction as recorded in Matthew 25. Referring to the elect, he says they will be invited at the last judgment to “take [their] inheritance, the kingdom prepared for [them] since the foundation of the world.” (25:34) But those who are cursed will be told, “Depart from me...into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his

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<sup>16</sup> Pieper, pp. 497-498.

<sup>17</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *Lenski New Testament Commentary – The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude*, p. 98, WORDsearch.

<sup>18</sup> Pieper, p. 498.

angels.” (25:41) Similarly in Acts 13 Paul and Barnabas tell the unbelieving Jews that since they reject the Word of God “and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’ [Note the function they are to perform for the Lord’s purposes.] When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.” (13:46-48) Pieper observes that in

this latter passage the faith of the Gentiles is traced to their eternal election, but the unbelief of the Jews is not represented as a consequence and result of their foreordination to damnation, but as a consequence and result of their resistance to God’s gracious will and operation. In Matthew 25 Christ says of the Kingdom of Glory that it was prepared for the blessed of His Father from the foundation of the world, hence from the beginning intended for them. Of the fire of hell, however, Christ says that it is prepared for the devil and his angels. If men go to hell, they go to a place originally not prepared for them. ‘Hell was originally not built for men.’<sup>19</sup>

The text in Romans 9:22 speaks of God’s great patience with the vessels of wrath, but it doesn’t say that God made them vessels of wrath. The fault for unbelief is not due to God’s predestination to reprobation but “to the devil and to men themselves, and not to God” Pieper notices.<sup>20</sup>

God in his love for those whom he has created is long-suffering, i.e., very patient. But he limits his patience. As we read in Romans 9:18, God does harden hearts. In order to understand this reality as much as humanly possible, we should read this verse in the context of the other passages where this teaching is mentioned, e.g., Exodus 4:21. As Youngblood and Kaiser observe

Nine times in Exodus the hardening of the pharaoh’s heart is ascribed to God...another nine times the pharaoh is said to have hardened his own heart.... The pharaoh alone was the agent of the hardening in each of the first five plagues. Not until the sixth plague did God confirm the pharaoh’s willful action (see 9:12), as he had told Moses he would do (see similarly Romans 1:24-28).<sup>21</sup>

God allows those who refuse to believe to persist in their obstinate disobedience until his purposes have been accomplished, and they have had their fair opportunity to respond in faith and obedience. Their hearts have become hardened. Why did God harden the heart of Pharaoh? In our limited and finite ability to understand, we cannot press beyond what we have been given, but we have been given enough to satisfy us. First of all, as we’ve

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<sup>19</sup> Pieper, p. 498.

<sup>20</sup> Pieper, p. 498.

<sup>21</sup> Ronald Youngblood and Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., comments on Exodus in *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), p. 92.

observed, God has the right to do what he wills. Second, God is good and perfect, as are all his ways. Third, God is just and fair to all; he gave Pharaoh all the time and people (e.g., Moses and Aaron) he needed to do what was right in God's perfect sight. Fourth, God in his love for all human beings always keeps in mind his ultimate purpose, to redeem his creation, and he will not allow the sin and evil of anyone to destroy the lives of those whom he loves and is saving. Recall these verses from Exodus 14 (underlining and explanatory comments in the brackets are mine and are not part of the text):

...I will harden Pharaoh's heart.... But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know [*an indication of part of God's purpose in this hardening*] that I am the LORD.

I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD [*and not their false gods who are neither real nor capable of helping them*] when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen. (14:17-18)

When the Bible speaks of God hardening the hearts of people we need to keep in mind the above observations, including that the hardening has been done after sufficient time for repentance and obedience, and that the hardening is done to accomplish God's redemptive purposes for all people. Recall what Paul says in Romans 11:

What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written: "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so they could not hear, to this very day." [Deuteronomy 29:4] (Romans 11:7-8)

Again, I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. (Romans 11:11)

Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again...I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins." (Romans 11:22-23, 25-26)

Thus we see that the hardening is not for all Israelites for all time. Theologian Anthony Hoekema explains:

Though Israel has been hardened in its unbelief, this hardening has always been and will continue to be only a partial hardening, never a total hardening. In other words, Israel will continue to turn to the Lord until the Parousia, while at the same time the fullness of the Gentiles is being gathered in. And in this way all Israel will be saved: not just the last generation of the Israelites, but all true Israelites—all those who are not just *of Israel* but are *Israel*, to use the language of Romans 9:6. Another way of putting this would be: all Israel in Romans 11:26 means the totality of the elect among Israel. The salvation of all Israel, therefore, does not take place exclusively at the end-time, but takes place throughout the era between Christ's first and second coming—in fact, from the time of the call of Abraham. All Israel, therefore, differs from the elect remnant spoken of in 11:5, but only as the sum total of all the remnants throughout history.<sup>22</sup>

The same principle is operative in these verses that we see in 1 Corinthians 5:5. In that passage a member of the Corinthian church committed such a grievous sin that became public knowledge that Paul told the Corinthians to excommunicate the man and “hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.” The judgment, while harsh, was an act of love, for it was done for the man's benefit; it had to be harsh in order for the man to recognize it as a wake-up call and come to his senses after receiving the buffets of Satan while outside the protection of the covenant community. The judgment was also to save the church from destruction; if they saw the man getting away with grievous sin without any reproof or negative consequences, their commitment to obedience and holiness would not only be diminished if not ultimately destroyed but also the effectiveness of their holy calling to accomplish the Lord's redemptive purposes in and through them. This text is an important reason for churches today to exercise church discipline but always in love and for the accomplishment of God's redemptive purposes.

Thus, Pieper notes that the words in Romans 9:18 and elsewhere about the hardening of human hearts

are incorrectly adduced as proof for a predestination to damnation. They do not mean that in God's heart there is no mercy for part of mankind, namely, for those who are finally lost. The Apostle expressly says the very opposite (ch. 11:32): [“For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all.” (NASB)]... The words [in Romans 9:18]... are not directed against the universal grace of God, but against work-righteousness, that is, against the delusion of man that by works he can merit something before God, and against the conceit that he can by works make God his Debtor. This scope of the passage is evident from the entire preceding and subsequent context, particularly also from the

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<sup>22</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), p. 145.

words: [“I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.”] (Romans 9:15-16)<sup>23</sup>

The clear teachings of Scripture must, of course be upheld, that those ultimately lost are not lost because of a lack of grace, but solely through their own fault, because of their wicked conduct toward God’s Word and gracious operation....<sup>24</sup>

As we discussed briefly above, Calvinists also point to 1 Peter 2:7-8 to support double predestination.

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,” [Psalm 118:22] and, “A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” [Isaiah 8:14] They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

Commenting on this passage, British Bible scholar and theologian Alan Stibbs has written,

The cornerstone on which people stumble is Jesus Christ.

7. Peter proceeds to stress both by scriptural quotations and by his own testimony that the simple, single and sufficient condition of realized benefit is faith only—faith in Christ. This benefit he describes...as a share in Christ’s ‘preciousness’ or ‘honour’....

8. The idea behind the words *a stone of stumbling*...is that of a stone or rock which lies in the road so that travelers knock against it or get tripped up by it. It is thus that Christ, once He is revealed, inescapably stands in the way of those who refuse to respond to the testimony about Him. *The word*, both spoken and living, becomes a stumbling-block to those who are *disobedient*, i.e. those who actively revolt against the gospel (see iv. 17). Those who thus disobey are the disbelieving. Unbelief is the root error. Just as true faith manifests itself in obedience, so heart unbelief inevitably finds expression in deliberate disobedience. In this pathway the disobedient, once they thus set themselves against Christ, find that the Christ who had offered to be for them is against them, interrupting their progress. Such outworking of judgment on unbelief is as divinely appointed as the way of salvation through faith in the exalted Christ.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Pieper, p. 500

<sup>24</sup> Pieper, p. 501.

<sup>25</sup> Alan M. Stibbs, *The First Epistle General of Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), p. 103.

Bible scholar, former Wheaton College Registrar, and my former colleague and friend at Christ Church of Oak Brook, Rev. George Cramer, has commented

God's sovereign choice in the corporate design of this "spiritual house" [mentioned in verse five] is abundantly evident. Even though the foundation stone was rejected by the "builders" (the leaders in Israel), God's purposes overruled. Jesus Christ has been established among men as a touchstone of faith and obedience. He is a divider among the people. To those who believe, He is "precious"; to the disobedient, He is a "stone of stumbling" and a "rock of offence" (2:7-8).

By noting God's design we do not conclude that God ordains man's perdition, but that it is ordained by man's own disobedience. On the other hand, those who esteem Him "precious" are an "elect [*chosen*] race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession" (ASV). With God thus working according to His own purpose in grace, Christian *hope* becomes a bright and blessed reality when evidenced by growth.<sup>26</sup>

Returning to the Greek, British Bible scholar, Edward Gordon Selwyn, points out that the "fundamental cause of their stumbling on the word is unbelief (*apistousi* [the unbelieving ones in verse seven] being the antecedent of *hoi* [the "who" of those "who stumble"]), its proximate cause is the disobedience (*apeithountes*) which is inseparable from unbelief."<sup>27</sup> Regarding the destiny of the unbelieving, disobedient, Selwyn adds, "it is not stated here that this rejection is final and irretrievable. The primary reference here is probably to the rejection of Christ by the Jews...and St. Paul in Rom. ix-xi. emphasizes both how their "stumbling" (xi. II) was over-ruled to the blessing of the Gentiles and also that it could be retrieved by their repentance (xi. 23 ff.)."<sup>28</sup>

A very important part of verse eight that must be kept in mind is the words, "They stumble because they disobey the message." Their disobedience is their own fault. To help us accurately interpret the text we need to pay close attention to the Greek term, *etethēsan*, which the NIV translates "destined for." The Greek word, *etethēsan*, is in the passive voice, thus, as we found in our study of Romans 9:22, we cannot use this text as a proof that God has from eternity actively decreed that these people have been destined for reprobation. Thus, as some interpret this passage, Peter is likely saying that unbelief is destined to result in eternal destruction.<sup>29</sup>

To answer this question it is again helpful to recall the purpose of election, which is functional: to maintain the witness to God's plan of salvation in every age so that the church will always exist and according to its calling proclaim Jesus Christ as the way, the

<sup>26</sup> George H. Cramer, *First and Second Peter* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1967), pp. 36-37.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Gordon Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (London: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1964), p. 164.

<sup>28</sup> Selwyn, p. 165.

<sup>29</sup> Donald W. Burdick and John Skilton, commentary on 1 Peter in *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), p. 1890.

truth, and the life (John 14:6). Especially in the light of the passages we've just studied, that some in every period of history will have been elected from before the world began does not imply that those who have not been elected "before the creation of the world" have been predestined to be doomed; it is not, therefore, necessary to interpret the Bible as teaching a double predestination. The elect are to reach out to the non-elect that those of the latter who respond in faith in Christ will be saved, as is God's desire. (1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9)

Other questions arise. Does his electing some in love mean that he doesn't love the others? No. In John 3:16 and elsewhere we read that God loves the world, *cosmos* in Greek, which means everyone, those he regenerates and also the unregenerate. Some try to charge God with being unjust for electing some and not others. If you are married, would it be accurate to say that you were unfair to choose your wife or your husband instead of others? Of course not.

Is it unfair that some are elected and some are not but still have the opportunity for salvation and membership in God's kingdom? It is possible that is the issue in Romans 9:14, "What then shall we say? Is God unjust?" With Paul we answer, "Not at all!" None of us even knows whether we are saved due to being elected before the creation of the world or whether we are saved due to one or more of the elect or those reached by the elect reaching us with the external call to believe that God made effective with his internal, effectual, call. Those who may not have been in the original elect are now part of the elect and have the call to function as the elect have been called to do. Furthermore, most practically, it doesn't matter whether we were in the original elect or have become part of the elect more recently, since we are all loved by God who does not show favoritism (Deuteronomy 10:17; Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11), and as part of his covenant we have the wonderful life-enhancing vocation (calling) to proclaim God's plan of salvation to all the world, for God truly wants all to be saved, and those will who "repent and believe" in Jesus Christ.

Is it unfair that some are saved and others, even evidently most (Matthew 7:13-14) are not saved? Not at all. First, all humans have had life and have borne the image of God which is a blessing far above all animal and plant life. Further, all have had the opportunity to be in an eternal relationship with God! Also, even those who have failed to appreciate and grasp that eternal and infinitely most important opportunity, have received rewards here on earth. (Matthew 6:2,5,16) In addition, God has given to all who reject him and lose eternal life all they need to believe and be saved. As we saw above, God is very patient, the word in the original Greek meaning long-suffering, giving people enough though not unlimited time to make the needed changes. In so doing, he shows respect to all humans whom he created and who bear his image, including those who reject him, by choosing to maintain their freedom and not overpower them, forcing them to believe, but of course there are consequences to the wrong choices and behaviors people make.<sup>30</sup> As all humans experience, who have been coerced, manipulated, and

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<sup>30</sup> Notice also Luke 8:37. When Jesus powerfully demonstrated his Lordship over the demons, the people in the region of the Gerasenes actually asked Jesus to leave them, because they were overcome with fear! They put up with all the dangerous and destructive demons operating in the area, even the many Jesus' cast

forced to do something they did not want to do, they resent it and find doing so very unsatisfying, unrewarding, unenjoyable, and unfulfilling.

It is also the same for the recipient of an action done unwillingly. Sometimes a child who has mistreated a sibling is told to “Go hug your sister and say you’re sorry.” How does the sister feel when her sibling reluctantly gives a resentful, limp without looking, and perfunctory hug with a mumbled, hardly audible, and through gritted teeth “I’m sorry” in an insincere tone of voice in forced compliance? You may have heard of the old saying, “A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.” That reality is due to the abrogation of the genuine, though not unlimited, freedom that is one of the aspects of God’s image he has given to us. When we are forced to do something against our will, it doesn’t seem right and is resisted. (Note the profound, extensive, and very practical implications of this reality elsewhere on the horizontal level, e.g., with your spouse, relatives, and friends.) God does not force belief on people, but he patiently does give enough time, and all we need with the Holy Spirit’s help, to choose to repent and believe. The human failure to do so is not God’s fault!

He too has feelings, and he wants people to obey him and do rightly out of our genuine and free desire to do so. (See, e.g., Exodus 20:6; Deuteronomy 5:10; 30:16; Nehemiah 1:5; 9:17; Psalm 119:167; Daniel 9:4; John 14:15, 21, 23. Cf. “God loves a cheerful giver.” 2 Corinthians 9:7)

### *Disputable Matters*

Of course, much more could be said. The foregoing only scratches the surface, and other questions arise. We should be glad to continue the dialogue whenever desired.

As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the subject of predestination and the related topics is one where fine Christians disagree. It is therefore helpful to recall the Bible’s teaching concerning such conflicts that will be useful as we address this issue. Regarding “disputable matters,” (Romans 14:1) Paul offers guidance in that chapter. If someone believes it is wrong for him or her to do something, then for him or her, it is wrong. (Romans 14:14) For someone else who is “fully convinced” that it is Biblical to do something, even that same thing the other person believes is wrong, he or she does so to the Lord. (Romans 14:2, 5-6, 14) Neither should judge the other. Both are permissible unless someone’s faith is in jeopardy by a believer acting in this manner.<sup>31</sup>

We affirm our unity with and love for those who disagree with us: we are one in Christ and, indeed, our Lord has commanded us to love them (see, e.g., John 13:34-35 and 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 where Paul defines that love as being patient, kind, not arrogant or

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out of the man he healed, but they didn’t want the Lord to stay with them! Thus, we read in this text they very unwisely requested Jesus to leave, “So he got into the boat and left.” He did not force them to listen to his Word, accept his message, and obey his will.

<sup>31</sup> As the *NIV Study Bible* makes clear in a comment on Romans 14:1, however, “Fellowship among Christians is not to be based on everyone’s agreement on disputable questions. Christians do not agree on all matters pertaining to the Christian life, nor do they need to.” Kenneth Barker, General Editor. *NIV Study Bible*. (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1985), p. 1727.

boastful, etc.); we should neither disregard nor disparage them. That should also be true of them toward us in such issues. (Romans 14:3-4)

It is also helpful to recall Matthew 16:19 where we read that our Lord has given the church the authority to “announce guilt or innocence” on certain matters.<sup>32</sup> In Matthew 18:18, he teaches that these decisions will be sustained in heaven. Putting these latter texts together, we can understand why different groups within the church universal can hold opposing positions on “disputable matters.” In such theological matters we should limit dogmatic and policy statements to those texts in the Bible that are passages related to the core of what God requires for salvation, clear to the rest of the church, and to which the church, not only present but throughout history, has expressed consensus or at least sufficient agreement. At all times we should act in love toward all others in the church, with special effort toward those who disagree with us.

The difficult texts should also be read in the light of Paul’s words in Romans 9:30-33, where we see the main point of the passage.

What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the “stumbling stone.” As it is written: “See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” [Quote from Isaiah 8:14; 28:16]

Much more could be and has been said on this important question. As I indicated above, these are some of the main reasons I lean toward the understanding of predestination and election I’ve described in this essay. Yet, I cannot be dogmatic on this matter; the foregoing is my attempt to understand God’s Word on this matter. I believe we should continue to listen to fellow believers who are Biblical scholars, theologians, and pastors who base their teaching on the Bible as God’s fully inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word and the leading of the Holy Spirit in the faithful preaching and teaching of the local church. In so doing we should remember the catholic (universal) nature of the church and consider the teaching of such leaders worldwide. It is important to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying through brothers and sisters in Christ in other cultures where the biases in our culture are not as influential. Of course, others have their own biases, but as we read and listen to the leaders God is raising up all over the world, we will learn more of the mind of Christ and be further equipped for his service.

### *More Practical Implications for Us*

Many say, where is the practical application for us in such teaching? The doctrines we’ve been considering in this essay are profound and intellectually challenging. Yet they have very practical implications for us.

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1466.

It takes little thought to be deeply moved when we consider that God has chosen us to be in his elect people, which election commissions us with his high and holy calling to partner with him in his plan of redemption of his creation! We, as his original covenant people, the Old Testament Israelite church, are elected for a function: to reach out to the world to introduce people to God and his love, to tell them who he is and what he is like and of his plans and purposes, including what he expects of people who would come into his presence. We have a great mission that gives our lives, and the lives of those we reach for Christ, great meaning and eternal significance!

We clearly sense the value we have in God's sight. His great love for us is supremely exhibited in his only-begotten Son's coming to sacrifice his life for us that we could have access to the presence of God and serve him forever.

Being made in the image of God, and having a degree of freedom, enables us to place great value on our lives. Recognizing that we are elect in a relationship with God who is sovereign gives us security. Human free will and God's sovereignty go perfectly together; they fit hand in glove. One way to put this reality in perspective, where we can rejoice in our freedom but not succumb to human hubris, is to remember a sign that appeared in a calendar picture: "You may be in the driver's seat; but God holds the map!"

Reflecting on the meaning of our election and the work to which God has called and is equipping us, our perspective is lifted from a focus on the here and now to include also the eternal perspective. How magnificently wonderful is our joy in knowing that this which we see all around us is not all there is to life!

The Biblical doctrine of election, assures us of our salvation, since our salvation is clearly all in God's grace and none of it in our merit. Our belief in Christ assures us we are in the elect and that we are so solely by God's unmerited love of us; i.e., we have done nothing to earn our salvation, for God does not require us to do works to be saved. We are totally unable to earn our salvation; in fact, we daily increase our debt to God. Pieper has well explained the situation with respect to how this reality comforts us: "Man does not see the absolute necessity of *universal* grace [not to be confused with the unbiblical concept of universal salvation] so long as the terrors of conscience have not yet seized his heart. But when his conscience is truly terrified (feels the *terrors conscientiae*), he will find nothing consoling but the grace that avails without any limitation for all sinners...."<sup>33</sup>

We do not have to worry about whether we are in the elect or are saved. We can have confidence that we are in the elect and are saved because of our faith in Jesus Christ. As Pieper has written, "With this Scriptural view of the mode of election, we look to Christ and the Gospel to determine whether we are elected, and we are happy to find that all our distress has vanished.... If a person asks: "Am I chosen to salvation?" he should in turn be asked: "Do you sincerely believe in the Gospel?"<sup>34</sup> If the person says "Yes" we can

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<sup>33</sup> Pieper, p. 482.

<sup>34</sup> Pieper, p. 476.

say that he or she is in the elect. For we can say, regarding what the Bible teaches concerning the elect, “from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.” (2 Thessalonians 2:13)

Pieper in a solid gold footnote (always read footnotes!) quotes an author who, quoting another author, noticed a hugely comforting reality expressed in the Greek of Romans 8:28-30, especially in verses 29-30. “Paul shows *ex professo* [by profession] in Rom. 8:28-30, for the consolation of the Christians, that all elect are assured of eternal glory. The glorification (*edoxasen*, aorist [past tense]) is just as inseparably linked to eternal election as the call (*ekalesen*), and the justification (*edikaiōsen*). Stoekhardt quotes Weiss: ‘To place the glorification on the same level of reliability with the *proegnō* [foreknew], *proōrise* [foreordained, predestined], *ekalese* [called], and *edikaiōsen* [justified], Paul chose the proleptic (anticipative) aorist.’”<sup>35</sup> What this means is that here we have in the Greek of the New Testament, God’s Word declaring that the glorification of God’s elect (which is yet to come for those of us still on earth in the first phase of our life) which will come in heaven, is as certain as those aspects of the life in Christ that his believers in him now already experience in their call and justification, which have already occurred! Further, our glorification (expressed in the Greek as a future event that has already occurred) is put in the same terms as God’s foreknowledge and foreordination that not only has already occurred but that occurred before the foundation of the world! Wow! How’s that for assurance?!

Pieper quotes Luther’s commentary on 1 Peter 1:2, “Elect according to the foreknowledge of God,” in which the great Reformation leader offers Biblical evidence of the supreme comfort that believers can have in Christ.

Therefore, when your sins and unworthiness trouble you and the thought comes to you that you might not be elected of God, also that the number of the elect is small and the company of the godless large, and you are terrified by the awful examples of divine wrath and judgment, then do not dispute long why God does this or that so, and not differently, when He could easily do so. Do not presume to explore the depths of divine foreknowledge with your reason, else you will certainly go astray and either sink into gloomy fatalism or turn epicurean. But hold firmly to the promises of the Gospel which teach you that Christ, the Son of God, became incarnate to bless all people on earth, that is, to redeem them from sin and death, justify and save them; and that He did this according to the command and gracious will of God our heavenly Father, who so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have eternal life, John 3:16. If you follow this counsel, namely, first of all acknowledge that you are by nature a child of wrath, worthy of eternal death and damnation, from which no creature, human or angelic, can save you, and then grasp the promise of God and believe that He is the merciful, truthful God, who from pure grace, without our work and merit, faithfully keeps what He has promised, and has sent

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<sup>35</sup> Pieper, p. 479.

Christ, His only Son, in order that He make satisfaction for your sins and give you His innocence and righteousness, finally to redeem you from all evil and from death; then do not doubt that you belong to the company of the elect. If we consider election in this manner, even as Paul does, it is comforting beyond measure.<sup>36</sup>

Jesus added these comforting words: “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” (John 10:27-30)

The church is the key means through which God is accomplishing his redemptive purposes. Jesus revealed how the church also is able to comfort his believers and to give them assurance. He asked his first disciples, “what about you?...Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock [of Peter’s testimony that Jesus is the Messiah] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” (Matthew 16:15-18)

One example of how this occurs in a powerfully practical way was given to me by Dr. James Muilenburg, from whom I was privileged to take two Old Testament courses, one of which was the prophecy of Jeremiah and the other was a course on major motifs (themes, e.g., election) of the Bible. He was a gifted teacher who was able to transport his students thousands of years back into the Old Testament time under study, so much so that it seemed like you could talk to Jeremiah himself! The last day of the second course, in my final conversation with this world-wide respected theological giant, I asked him, “Dr. Muilenburg, do you ever struggle with any of the doctrines of the church in your understanding of them, and, if you do, what do you do?” He said, “Yes, and at those times I stand with the church in weekly worship and recite, testify, and believe with the Lord’s people through the ages the words of the Apostles’ Creed, and then I’m aware of my feet being on the solid ground of God’s eternal Word.” Another ancient creed that is good to recite in church regularly is the Nicene Creed, which is the creed most widely used by churches all over the world as a summary of the most essential points of the Christian faith.

For many further assurances that you are saved in Christ, read the first letter of John. For just one example, “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands.” (1 John 2:1-3 NIV) Is there anything more practical than having such assurance that you are in God’s grip in Christ with the most important job in the world to do?! That you are intimately known by and on speaking terms with the Owner and Sovereign ruler of all creation?! That he has revealed that you are called to proclaim that

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<sup>36</sup> Pieper, p. 484.

this phase of life is very brief but an eternity of joy is just ahead for all who will come to the Lord on his terms?! Thanks be to the triune God: Father, only begotten Son Christ Jesus, and Holy Spirit, three in one!

**For Discussion:**

1. How can you explain the terms God's sovereignty, predestination, and election to someone else? In Biblical theology, how do these terms fit together with human free will?
2. What can you say to someone who says that God's election reduces the sense of need and motivation for witnessing and missions?
3. How do you answer someone who says that if God knows everything he therefore has predestined everything to occur way ahead of time?
4. How does the Biblical teaching about election give you assurance and comfort regarding your salvation in Christ?
5. What other benefits does the doctrine of election provide for believers in and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ?