

UCC Hot Topics: The Doctrine of Election: Grace, Sovereignty, and Our Response

Introduction: The Implications of Grace

Election is one of the most debated doctrines in Christian theology. It is a topic that requires diligence, humility, and trust in Scripture. Our approach to this doctrine should not make us more arrogant or harsh, but more loving toward God and toward people.

Personal Story:

I recall a time during a church plant discussion when we were studying Ephesians. One young woman was visibly upset when she encountered the doctrine of election for the first time. "I have been going to church my whole life and went to Christian school, and I have never heard of this!" she exclaimed. Her immediate questions were:

- Doesn't election mean some people have no hope?
- Does this mean God predestines some people to hell?
- If election is true, why should we evangelize?

These concerns are common and need to be addressed with both biblical faithfulness and pastoral care.

1. God's Sovereignty & Human Responsibility

Charles Spurgeon's Response:

Spurgeon was once asked, "How do you reconcile God's sovereignty and human responsibility?" He responded, "*I don't reconcile friends.*" This suggests that sovereignty and responsibility are not at odds but work together.

Biblical Foundation:

- **Ephesians 2:8-10** – "By grace you have been saved through faith... it is the gift of God." (**God's sovereignty**) "Created for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." (**Human responsibility**)
- **Genesis 12:1-3** – God elected Abram to be the father of a nation.
- **Deuteronomy 7:6-8** – God chose Israel not because of their merit but because of His love and faithfulness.

We often think in either/or categories:

- Either **God predestines** our actions OR **we make choices** that matter.
- Scripture, however, teaches **both**.

Illustration:

A father returns home from work, and his toddler daughter eagerly wants to carry his briefcase. The problem? It's too heavy for her. So, the father lifts both his daughter and the briefcase and carries them inside.

- **Who carried the briefcase?** The daughter? Yes. The father? Yes.
- She was truly carrying it, but only because her father was carrying her.
- **This mirrors salvation and good works**—we are actively involved, yet completely dependent on God.

2. The Means of Salvation: Faith as Ordained by God

God has not only ordained the **ends** (who will be saved) but also the **means** (how they will be saved).

Biblical Support:

- **Ephesians 2:8-10** – Salvation is by faith, yet faith is a gift.
- **Romans 10:14-17** – Faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.
- **Acts 13:48** – "As many as were appointed to eternal life believed."

Common Objections:

- "If God predestines everything, why pray or evangelize?"
- **Response:** Because God uses those as the means to accomplish His will.

3. Is Predestination Double? (Election & Reprobation)

Question: If God elects some to salvation, does that mean He predestines others to hell?

Two Views:

1. **High Calvinism (Double Predestination):**
 - God actively chooses some for salvation and some for damnation.
2. **Moderate Reformed View:**
 - God elects some to salvation, but the non-elect are simply **passed over**, left in their sin.

Key Passage: Canons of Dort (1:15)

- God does **not** cause sin but leaves sinners in their rebellion.
- He saves some out of grace and allows others to remain in their chosen state.

R.A. Finlayson's Summary:

1. Scripture does not teach symmetrical predestination.
2. Election is based on grace; reprobation is based on personal sin.
3. Means are used for election, but not for reprobation.
4. Grace is given to some, but injustice is done to none.
5. God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11).
6. The elect become a **new humanity in Christ**.

4. The Practical Implications of Election

A. Election and Evangelism

- **Election fuels evangelism—it doesn't kill it.**
- **Why evangelize if God has already chosen?**
 - Because we don't know who the elect are.
 - Because God commands us to evangelize (**Matthew 28:19-20**).
 - Because evangelism is the means by which God calls His elect.
- **Acts 18:9-10** – Paul kept preaching because God told him, *"I have many people in this city."*

B. Election and Humility

- **Election leaves no room for pride.**
 - We deserve nothing but wrath, yet God saved us.
 - "But by the grace of God, there go I."
 - Understanding election makes us **more humble, not more arrogant**.

C. Election and Good Works

- **Election produces fruit.**
 - **Ephesians 2:10** – Good works were prepared beforehand.
 - **2 Corinthians 5:15** – Christ died that we might live for Him.
 - Our obedience is not to earn salvation but as a response to grace.

5. Commonly Asked Questions

1. **Does election mean we have no free will?**
 - No. We make real choices, but they are under God's sovereignty (Genesis 50:20; Acts 2:23).
2. **If God chooses, why should we evangelize?**
 - Evangelism is the means God uses to call His elect (Romans 10:14-17).
3. **What about those who never hear the gospel?**
 - God is just and will judge all people righteously (Romans 1:18-20; Acts 17:30-31).
4. **Isn't election unfair?**
 - If fairness were the standard, none would be saved. Salvation is by grace (Romans 9:14-16).

Conclusion: The Doctrine of Election Leads to Worship

Election is not a cold, detached doctrine, it is a doctrine of grace that should:

- **Humble us**
- **Make us passionate for evangelism**
- **Cause us to love God more deeply**

Final Reflection:

- How does understanding election impact your view of salvation?
- How does it encourage you in your Christian walk?
- How can we teach this doctrine in a way that builds faith rather than controversy?

Extra:

Understanding Free Will in the Reformed View

One of the most common questions about election is: Do we still have free will? Many assume that if God has chosen who will be saved, then human decisions do not matter. However, the Reformed view teaches that humans do make real choices, but those choices are always consistent with their nature.

Q: What is free will?

Free will generally refers to a person's ability to make choices. However, how we define **the nature** of that will determines whether or not it is truly "free."

- In the **libertarian (Arminian) view**, free will means the ability to choose between alternatives **without necessity or coercion**—meaning that human choices are completely independent of prior causes.
- In the **compatibilist (Reformed) view**, free will means that people make real choices, but **those choices always align with their nature**—and in our sinful state, we will never freely choose God unless He intervenes.

Q: If we have free will, why does the Bible say we are in bondage to sin?

The Bible repeatedly teaches that **apart from God's grace, our will is not free but enslaved to sin.**

Consider these passages:

- **John 8:34** – "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin." This means that our natural state is not one of neutrality but of bondage.
- **Romans 3:10-12** – "No one is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God." This means that **left to ourselves, we will never seek after God.**
- **Ephesians 2:1-3** – We were *dead* in our sins and followed the desires of our flesh, meaning that our "free" choices always led us further into rebellion.

The **bondage of the will** means that **while we make real choices, those choices are always dictated by our sinful nature unless God changes our heart.** Martin Luther wrote extensively about this in his book *The Bondage of the Will*, arguing that apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, man cannot turn to God on his own.

Q: If we are in bondage, how can we be held responsible for our actions?

This is a difficult question, but Scripture affirms **both God's sovereignty and human responsibility.**

- **Acts 2:23** – Jesus was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God," yet those who crucified Him were still morally responsible for their actions.
- **Genesis 50:20** – Joseph tells his brothers, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." Their sin was real, yet it was also part of God's sovereign plan.

We are responsible because we **willingly choose sin**, even though God's plan is unfolding through those choices. **Our responsibility is not removed just because God is in control.**

Q: If God must change our hearts for us to believe, does that mean we are robots?

Not at all. God's sovereignty in salvation does not mean He forces people to believe against their will. Instead, He **changes their hearts so that they willingly and joyfully choose Christ.** Consider **Ezekiel 36:26-27**, where God promises: "I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you... I will cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." This shows that **God does not override our will—He transforms it.**

Before salvation, we freely reject Christ. After salvation, we freely love Him. We are not robots, but transformed people who now desire God because of His grace.

How Should We Treat Churches That Disagree on Election?

Q: Should we separate from churches that reject election?

No. While election is an important doctrine, **it is not an essential doctrine for salvation.** There are many godly, Christ-centered churches that hold to an Arminian understanding of free will.

What truly matters is whether a church preaches **the Gospel of grace**, that salvation is through **faith in Christ alone.** If a church denies salvation by grace, we must **lovingly but firmly** stand for the truth.

However, if a church simply has a different view on election but preaches salvation by faith in Christ alone, we should **seek unity in the Gospel.**