

# A Defense of Individual Election unto Salvation & Critique of Absolute Corporate Election

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First, we begin with basic definition of the terminology:

Individual election is that God has chosen specific persons to make up the body of Christ from all eternity. The Second Helvetic Confession contains a classic expression of this doctrine, which is worth quoting in full, as representative of the Reformed position (the precise meaning of the biblical terminology will be considered below), <http://www.creeds.net/helvetic/c10.htm>:

*God Has Elected Us Out of Grace.* From eternity God has freely, and of his mere grace, without any respect to men, predestinated or elected the saints whom he wills to save in Christ, according to the saying of the apostle, God chose us in him before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). And again: Who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago, and now has manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus (II Tim. 1:9 f.).

*We Are Elected or Predestinated in Christ.* Therefore, although not on account of any merit of ours, God has elected us, not directly, but in Christ, and on account of Christ, in order that those who are now ingrafted into Christ by faith might also be elected. But those who were outside Christ were rejected, according to the word of the apostle, Examine yourselves, to see whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?- unless indeed you fail to meet the test!(II Cor. 13:5).

*We Are Elected for a Definite Purpose.* Finally, the saints are chosen by God for a definite purpose, which the apostle himself explains when he says, He chose us in him for adoption that we should be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption to be his sons through Jesus Christ that they should be to the praise of the glory of his grace (Eph. 1:4 ff.).

*We Are to Have a Good Hope for All.* And although God knows who are his, and here and there mention is made of the small number of elect, yet we must hope well of all, and not rashly judge any man to be a reprobate. For Paul says to the Philippians, I thank my God for you all (now he speaks of the whole Church in Philippi), because of your fellowship in the Gospel, being persuaded that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is also right that I have this opinion of you all (Phil. 1:3 ff.).

*Whether Few Are Elect.* And when the Lord was asked whether there were few that should be saved, he does not answer and tell them that few or many should be saved or damned, but rather he exhorts every man to strive to enter by the narrow door (Luke 13:24): as if he should say, It is not for you curiously to inquire about these matters, but rather to endeavor that you may enter into heaven by the straight way.

*What in This Matter Is To Be Condemned.* Therefore we do not approve of the impious speeches of some who say, "Few are chosen, and since I do not know whether I am among the number of the few, I will enjoy myself." Others say, "If I am predestinated and

elected by God, nothing can hinder me from salvation, which is already certainly appointed for me, no matter what I do. But if I am in the number of the reprobate, no faith or repentance will help me, since the decree of God cannot be changed. Therefore all doctrines and admonitions are useless." Now the saying of the apostle contradicts these men: The Lord's servant must be ready to teach, instructing those who oppose him, so that if God should grant that they repent to know the truth, they may recover from the snare of the devil, after being held captive by him to do his will (II Tim. 2:23 ff.).

*Admonitions Are Not in Vain Because Salvation Proceeds from Election.* Augustine also shows that both the grace of free election and predestination, and also salutary admonitions and doctrines, are to be preached (Lib. de Dono Perseverantiae, cap. 14 ff.).

*Whether We Are Elected.* We therefore find fault with those who outside of Christ ask whether they are elected. And what has God decreed concerning them before all eternity? For the preaching of the Gospel is to be heard, and it is to be believed; and it is to be held as beyond doubt that if you believe and are in Christ, you are elected. For the Father has revealed unto us in Christ the eternal purpose of his predestination, as I have just now shown from the apostle in II Tim. 1:9-10. This is therefore above all to be taught and considered, what great love of the Father toward us is revealed to us in Christ. We must hear what the Lord himself daily preaches to us in the Gospel, how he calls and says: Come to me all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest (Matt. 11:28). God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life (John 3:16). Also, It is not the will of my Father that one of these little ones should perish (Matt. 18:14). Let Christ, therefore be the looking glass, in whom we may contemplate our predestination. We shall have a sufficiently clear and sure testimony that we are inscribed in the Book of Life if we have fellowship with Christ, and he is ours and we are his in true faith.

For all practical purposes, predestination and election may be considered synonyms, with the distinction that predestination implies the purpose of God, and election the actual choice which results from that purpose.

In Arminian circles, it is quite common to read the election/predestination language of the Scriptures as "corporate" election, that God did not chose individuals per se, but that he instead chose the church in general, in Christ. Here is an example of this type of theology, found at <http://www.truthablaze.com/elect.html>, in an anonymous article:

The next thing I want us to look at is the corporate nature of election. Some see election as God choosing individuals for salvation (outside of their own volition or will). But the scriptures paint a picture of God electing "a people" for salvation, not "a person." I know that some will disagree with this and I will deal with some common objections in just a moment... But for now let's look at the concept of corporate election from the scriptures.

**Ephesians 4:12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:**

**Matthew 16:18 And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it**

**I Peter 2:9 But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light; Revelation 21:9 And there came unto me**

**one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife.**

In the Old Testament, we see that from early on, God determined that He would have for Himself "a people." Within this covenant with His people, there were certain conditions that had to be met in order to receive the blessing, salvation and favor of God. Even though the promises were made to this "people", the individuals still were responsible to respond in faith and obedience to the commands. Let's take a look:

**Deuteronomy 29:18 Lest there should be among you man, or woman, or family, or tribe, whose heart turneth away this day from the LORD our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations; lest there should be among you a root that beareth gall and wormwood; 29:19 And it come to pass, when he heareth the words of this curse, that he bless himself in his heart, saying, I shall have peace, though I walk in the imagination of mine heart, to add drunkenness to thirst: 29:20 The LORD will not spare him, but then the anger of the LORD and his jealousy shall smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the LORD shall blot out his name from under heaven. 29:21 And the LORD shall separate him unto evil out of all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant that are written in this book of the law**

So we see that even though many wonderful promises were given to this "people" (i.e. Israel), in order to receive those promises, the individuals had to follow after the Lord.

Another example of this principle can be found in II Kings:

**II Kings 21:14 And I will forsake the remnant of mine inheritance, and deliver them into the hand of their enemies; and they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies; 21:15 Because they have done that which was evil in my sight, and have provoked me to anger, since the day their fathers came forth out of Egypt, even unto this day.**

Getting back to the subject of corporate election, we can positively assert that the salvation and destination of the elect is certain. This group (called the body of Christ, the elect, the church) will be presented to Christ without spot or blemish. This much is certain :

**Ephesians 5:27 That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish**

Christ will present this group to Himself as a glorious church. But each individual must decide whether or not he/she will be a part of this elect group. This is very clear in the scriptures and in no uncertain terminology.

This is neatly summarized in another article by Vance Stanson:

The term *predestination* means "to mark out beforehand," and refers to the plan and goal of salvation itself, not to specific individuals. It should be understood in the corporate sense, rather than in the sense that each individual was predestined to either eternal life or eternal condemnation (<http://www.biblestudy.org/basicart/predestination-election.html>).

In this article I propose to examine the concept through the lens of Scripture from an exegetical perspective. The primary passage for consideration is Eph 1:3-14, with discussion of related passages such as Rom 8:29-30 in order to clarify the broader biblical

perspective.<sup>1</sup> My argument is that there is no dichotomy between corporate and individual election, but rather the two concepts are in perfect harmony in the Scriptures. Furthermore, those who argue absolute corporate election as opposed to individual election are attempting to defend their concept of free will in the *ordo salutis*, so we see that their exegesis has a theological motivation that is in fact foreign to the biblical texts most pertinent to the subject.

**Principle Text: Eph 1:3-14** (with the most relevant portions emphasized):

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, [4] *even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love [5] he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, [6] to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. [7] In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, [8] which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight [9] making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ [10] as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. [11] In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, [12] so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. [13] In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, [14] who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.*

This text is one of those passages in the Scriptures that is so content rich and rife with implications that even book length treatments fail to capture all that may be derived from their study, so that the brief examination here, focused on one theological theme, can hardly do it justice.

Paul's<sup>2</sup> purpose in Eph 1 is to set the foundation for his arguments concerning the nature and character of the church, a major theme of this epistle.<sup>3</sup> He begins by the extraordinary statement that every spiritual (πνευματικη) blessing is the present possession (notice the aorist participle εὐλογησας) of the believer granted by the Father in Christ.<sup>4</sup> The possession of these blessings is in the heavenly realms, which should be understood not so much as a physical location as an eschatological, redemptive-history fulfillment category. The fact that these blessings are "in the heavenlies" (ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις) means

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture verses are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> I am simply assuming Pauline authorship of Ephesians for this article, although this does not affect the exegesis of the text on this particular issue. For typical arguments contra Pauline authorship, see Andrew Lincoln, *Ephesians*, (Dallas: Word, 1990), p. lix-lxxiii; for a comprehensive treatment pro-Pauline, Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), p. 2-61.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Hoehner, p. 111-112; Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 25-29, and Eph 1:22-23; 2:11-21; 3:6, 10-11, 20-21; 4:4; 5:22-33.

<sup>4</sup> This may actually be read as a Trinitarian reference. Father and Son are obvious, and Paul's usage of the word "spiritual" here is consistent with his employment elsewhere, meaning "of the Spirit of God" and not simply spiritual in some generic sense.

that they are really and fully the possession of the believer, since they are in Christ, as even believers themselves are seen throughout the epistle to be in Christ.<sup>5</sup>

The first blessing which is listed is in fact that of election. “Just as” (καθως) in vs. 4 is used here to explain precisely what Paul means in vs. 3, and begins a list of the spiritual blessings which Paul wishes to emphasize for his readers. The word used to describe God’s activity in this passage is normally translated “chosen,” ἐξελεξετο, and has a semantic range including “choose, select.” The form is middle deponent, and preserves something of the original use of the middle, that the action is performed in the interest of the subject.<sup>6</sup> The verb naturally implies the involvement of the will of the one choosing, though context determines the criteria by which the choice is made. Here, Paul mentions no external criterion at all, but characterizes the activity both temporally and purposively, as “before the foundation of the world” and to be “holy and blameless before him.” The placement of “in love” (ἐν ἀγαπῇ) is quite ambiguous here, perfectly in a position that can modify either the clause preceding or the clause following, and should probably be taken with both. In the discussion of this somewhat rarified topic, these words remind us that for Paul, God’s election from before creation is no abstract theological consideration, but one which is characterized by and indeed a result of God’s love. How do we know that God loved his people? That he sent his only Son. This is emphasized by the temporal reference. God’s choice is not bound by time, but took place before creation itself, so great is the love of God for his people.

Paul then further explains the implications of this blessing using vocabulary which implies not simply the activity, but the intent or purpose of the activity. This has already been described by the purpose (ἵνα) clause above, but Paul is hardly being systematic here, and he has yet further explication of his subject. God has in fact “predestined” or “predetermined” (προορισας) the recipients of this activity to be adopted in Christ. The verb προορίζω means to determine, plan or choose something beforehand, the compound element προ- emphasizing the futurity of the action in terms of its desired result.<sup>7</sup> Paul uses an additional prepositional phrase to qualify this activity: “according to (κατα) the pleasure<sup>8</sup> of his will.” No external criterion governing God’s choice is given in this context, but an internal criterion is given, the simple fact that it pleased God so to act, and the action was therefore in line with his will.

Would that we had time similarly to treat the blessings of redemption, forgiveness, and God’s purpose in history, but the editor insists that we stick to our subject. I will note in vs. 8-10, key words related to God’s will and purpose are used to describe God’s plans

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<sup>5</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of his Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 346-347. On the concept “in Christ” in Ephesians, see 1:1; 2:6, 2:7,10,13; 3:6,21; 4:32.

<sup>6</sup> This is probably why the verb is normally in the middle deponent form: to choose something naturally implies that the choice is in the interest of the chooser.

<sup>7</sup> While we wish to avoid the genetic fallacy, the observation that ὀρίζω was used of carpenters or architects drawing up their plans still makes a nice preaching illustration.

<sup>8</sup> Εὐδοκία. Nearly every English translation uses here “pleasure” or the equivalent. The ESV’s “purpose of his will” fails to capture a nuance that is present in most contexts where the word is used, and nothing in the context here suggests otherwise.

for history as related to Christ. It is “the mystery<sup>9</sup> of his will according to his pleasure” (εὐδοκίαν again) which “he set forth in Christ.” God has a plan which encompasses all of history, a plan to bring all things under the headship of Christ. “All things” is clearly intended here in the comprehensive sense: nothing is to be left out, but in the words of Paul in Philippians 2:10-11, “every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord...”

In vs. 11, the elective, predestinating activity of God is again emphasized. There is a real connection here to the previous verses. If God has a plan and purpose which encompasses all of creation, then that plan and purpose has special reference to the objects of his love, the church. Paul here speaks of receiving an inheritance, and emphasizes that this reception was “predestined,” repeating the same key vocabulary item discussed above. He employs further language which finds the locus of this activity in the plan of God, and in no other place. It is “according to [his] purpose” (κατα προθεσιν), and that purpose is qualified by the fact that God accomplishes everything “according to the purpose (βουλην) of his will. The result? “So that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be to the praise of his glory.”

God’s activity in election is therefore seen as the result of his will and purpose, and Paul sees fit here to give no other reason or explanation for why God has done what he has done. Of great importance to our treatment are the pronouns (both the literal pronouns and those implied in the form of the verbs). Paul does not speak in abstract terms here, of the “church” or “the people of God.” Instead, appropriate to his actual content, he interchanges the first person plural and second person plural pronouns to emphasize the precise recipients of God’s elective activity and its consequences. God “chose *us* in him before the foundation of the world that *we* should be holy and blameless...”<sup>10</sup> Paul then takes pains to point out that the Ephesians themselves have not been left out, but having heard the Gospel and believed, they have been sealed by the holy Spirit, and included in the inheritance which Paul has already described. They too have a share in all the blessings enumerated in 1:3-11, and they too are the objects of God’s predestinating love. “*You* also, when *you* heard...were sealed...” In vs. 14, when Paul switches back to the first person plural, his flow of discourse indicates that he is now including both groups as those who look forward to full possession of the inheritance for which both groups have been sealed. Paul, therefore, has reference to two particular groups that are the object of God’s election: the group with which he identifies, and the Ephesians. These are not abstract plurals, but groups consisting of real individuals as the recipients of God’s grace.

### **Rom 8:29-31**

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<sup>9</sup> Μυστηριον in Paul regularly refers to something hidden in the past, but now revealed in the fullness of redemptive history.

<sup>10</sup> Who are the “we?” Is Paul referring to himself and his associates in distinction to the Ephesian Christians, or is he referring to the Jews as the first recipients of the Gospel? Overall context (Paul normally went to the synagogue first) and his comments in 2:11-22 would indicate the latter, but either way, Paul has a particular group in mind.

As part of his extended argument in Rom 8, Paul uses the language of foreknowledge and predestination with regard to accomplishing his purposes in Christ. While Paul is not suggesting an *ordo salutis* here per se, it is certainly true that that he is presenting a sequence of events that are, from the human perspective, temporally understood. Note that Paul does not qualify the objects of his foreknowledge (προγινώσκω) in any of the actions or attitudes of those objects, but simply states that God's redemptive activity toward these objects is grounded in the fact that he already knew them, literally that he "knew before." If we extend our consideration back one verse to 28 (as properly we should, since vs. 29 simply continues the argument, providing the reason for vs. 28), we see that God causes all things to work together for good for those he loves, for the called according to his purpose. The vocabulary here is quite similar to that used in Eph 1, and the concepts are identical.<sup>11</sup> This indicates that the scope or range of Paul's thought on this subject is the same as that of the parallel passages in Ephesians, but Paul adds emphasis to the purpose of God by his statement concerning God's foreknowledge.

What is the nature of this foreknowledge? If we examine the canonical OT background, we see that God's knowledge of future events is active and discriminating. A classic proof text with regard to this is Jer 1:5, where God declares that he knows Jeremiah before he (God) even formed him in the womb, setting him apart and appointing him as a prophet to the nations. The suggestion is obvious: God knew Jeremiah ahead of time, not in terms of grounding his choice of Jeremiah in any actions of Jeremiah (how can one not yet even conceived perform any actions?), but in the sense that God knew who Jeremiah would be, formed him, and chose him for the prophetic task. All of this activity, including God's foreknowing, is based in God, and not in the object of the activity.

### **Rom 9:6-24**

This passage is another one that is far too rich to mine completely in this short article, but it contains a number of conceptual parallels to the passages already considered. Paul in this section is considering the implications of God's rejection of Israel and his acceptance of the Gentiles. The question then arises "Has the word of God therefore failed?" Paul's point is really quite simple – not all who are born actually belong to Israel, but God in fact deliberately chose some and rejected others. Paul uses three OT illustrations to make his point:

1. Although Paul only mentions Abraham, Sarah and Isaac, his brief mention surely serves to bring to mind the entire complex of events. God himself provided Isaac to ensure that his promises would be fulfilled. Isaac would be the chosen one, the son of the promise, whereas Ishmael would be excluded from the covenant (though God will allow him to become great in a limited sense due to his relationship with Abraham).
2. Paul's second example is even more direct, that of Jacob and Esau. Paul strongly emphasizes that the most important aspect in this discussion is God's choice, not the choices made by Esau and Jacob. God's choice, in fact, predates even the birth of the two children, so that no action on their part influences God's decision. The purpose

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<sup>11</sup> "To those whom he loves," τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν, Eph 1:5 ἐν ἀγάπῃ; "the called," τοῖς... κλητοῖς, Eph 1:11 ἐκληρωθῶμεν; "according to his purpose," κατὰ προθεσίαν, Eph 1:11, identical phrase.

clause “in order that (ἵνα) God’s purpose (προθεσις) in election (κατ’ ἐκλογὴν) might stand clearly underscores that the will of God is the determinative factor in the eventual fates of Jacob and Esau, “not because of works (cf. Eph 2:8-10), but because of his call” (ἐκ τοῦ καλοῦντος). The vocabulary affinities with both Eph 1 and Rom 8:29-31 are obvious. Paul uses this type of language to stress God’s sovereign redemptive choice in the affairs of human beings.<sup>12</sup>

3. Paul’s third example concerns the individual Pharaoh. Why does Pharaoh resist God’s will? In this passage, the explanation is not accorded to the “free will” of Pharaoh, but to the purposes of God. God is the one who choose the objects of his mercy, so that “it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God” (vs. 16). In vs. 17, Paul cites Exodus 9:16 to indicate that God’s purposes exceed human expectation and human perspectives. He then repeats his earlier statement, by way of conclusion of this section, that the source of mercy is nothing in the object granted the mercy, but the will of God himself.

Paul then goes on to justify these arguments (almost a theodicy) using the famous illustration of the potter and the clay, emphasizing that human beings have no right to question the will and purposes of God, but must accept them with all due humility as the creature to the creator.

## Conclusion

We find, therefore, that God’s elective, predestinating activity finds its sole source in the will of God, in the creator, and not the creature, who is in fact created and redeemed to serve God’s purposes, and not his own, and that the objects of this activity are not simply the church in abstract, but devolve down to real people. Logic itself, and certainly logic which is here in no way contradictory to anything in the Scriptures, teaches us that every group consists of individuals, and for the group to be chosen, the individuals comprising that group must be chosen as well. God’s love is corporate, indeed, but it is also personal, and directed toward each and every believer, who is viewed as in Christ from before the foundation of the world. The traditional reformation doctrine of individual election, then, in no way contradicts corporate election, but rather is foundational for the concept. God has a definite number in mind, a number foreknown for all eternity, who make up the church, and ensures that each and every one of his elect are included, and no one can snatch out of the Son’s hand those whom the Father has given him...

From a broader theological perspective, the nature of God and his will must invariably impact the nature and application of God’s redemptive activity. We know from various Scriptures that God is omniscient and omnipotent: there is nothing that he does not know, and nothing that he cannot do that is in accord with his nature and purpose. God’s

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<sup>12</sup> The Arminian often objects that Paul is talking about the two individuals as symbolic of their respective nations, so that what is in view are not Jacob and Esau as two individuals, but their descendents as a whole. From a covenantal perspective, there is some value to this observation: all the descendents of Esau are destined to perish (Obadiah 15-18), and many of the literal descendents of Jacob are intended to find salvation. However, note that Paul is adducing this example precisely to explain the fate of many in national Israel who reject Christ. While the covenantal/corporate aspect is certainly present, by mentioning them as individuals, Paul demonstrates that God’s elective will has personal reference and application.

foreknowledge, as we have seen above, is comprehensive, discriminating, and selective. His will is always accomplished, he who knows the end from the beginning, and never fails to bring his plans to fruition (Isa 46:9-10). It is simply contrary to this revelation to assume that God's will is only applied in some general sense over which he has no ultimate control. Instead, even as God could choose Jeremiah from before birth to be a witness to the nations, so God's love is set not only on an abstraction called "the church," but on each and every true member of that church. This knowledge, as many have pointed out, should not make us proud, but instead drive us to our knees in thanksgiving and praise as we contemplate the greatness and glory of God and his purposes in redemption. With the apostle Paul in Romans 11:33-36 we must confess:

[33] Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

[34] "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?"

[35] "Or who has given a gift to him, that he might be repaid?"

[36] For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.