

TULIP: A FREE GRACE PERSPECTIVE PART 2: UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION

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I. INTRODUCTION

TULIP is the Calvinistic means of categorizing the broad doctrine of human salvation and stands for: 1) Total Depravity; 2) Unconditional Election; 3) Limited Atonement; 4) Irresistible Grace; and 5) the Perseverance of the Saints. It is here that we seek the truth about these five points regardless of whether the conclusion fits the systems of Calvinism, Arminianism, or neither.

This article considers the doctrine of divine election.

The two major views of election are the Calvinist and the Arminian views. Lightner says there is a “great division [that] exists in evangelicalism over the doctrine of election. Unconditional election is the belief that God sovereignly, on the basis of grace, chose before time individuals on whom he would bestow his saving grace. Those who hold this view are Calvinists. Those who reject the teaching are Arminians.”¹

There is a third view—called the Corporate view of election—which became popular with the writings of Karl Barth. Ryrie summarizes Barth’s teaching and its evangelical offshoot:

[Barth] taught that election is primarily election of Christ, then the election of the community, and finally the election of individuals. Actually all are elect in Christ, though unbelievers do not know that. This is why Barth’s doctrine of election caused him to be accused of universalism.²

An evangelical form of this same concept (perhaps in some cases influenced by Barth and in some cases not) views election as the choosing

¹ Robert P. Lightner, *Evangelical Theology: A Survey and Review* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 208.

² Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 358.

of the group, the church, in Christ, but not individuals until after they become members of the group by faith. In the evangelical form there is no suggestion of universalism, though the idea of corporate election is common to both. We cannot speak of individuals being elected before the foundation of the world but only of the church being so elected in Christ (Eph 1:4). When an individual believes in Christ, he is placed in that elect group, and then he can be said to be elect. "What did God choose before the foundation of the world? The church. Not individuals, but the body of Christ."³

The Corporate view, while held by some, negates the biblical teaching of God's choice of individual election and seems to contradict the Scripture in regard to the use of personal pronouns in Romans 8 and Ephesians 1 which emphasize the individual nature of election. Klooster says,

Election (as well as reprobation) is individual, personal, specific, particular. Ephesians refers repeatedly to "us" and "we" in connection with election (1:4-5, 12). In Romans, Paul refers to "those" whom God foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and glorified (8:29-30). Rom. 9 indicates that personal election unto salvation was operative within the election of Israel.⁴

Corporate election *of individuals* in the evangelical sense would be God's selection or election *after* one believes. This goes beyond the Arminian understanding of foresight, making even foreknowledge unnecessary.⁵ God just "calls it as it is," when one believes. In the Barthian sense the doctrine of individual election would be destroyed. Since our

³ Ibid., 359. Ryrie quotes Dan Esterline, "The Doctrine of Predestination," *Moody Monthly* (February 1979): 86. For the same or similar views Ryrie suggests: Roger T. Forster and V. Paul Marston, *God's Strategy in Human History* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1975) and Robert Shank, *Elect in the Son* (Springfield, MO: Westcott, 1970), 48-49.

⁴ F. H. Klooster, "Elect, Election" in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 349.

⁵ Such a view is compatible with the newer trend towards "Open Theology," the more recent speculation that God created us with a sort of freedom which He cannot override or control and that He does not possess knowledge of all things. His knowledge is limited and no pre-creation election is possible for a being that is limited in knowledge. This arises from those steeped in Arminianism, perhaps, but it goes beyond that position. For more information, see Clark Pinnock, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

current discussion involves individual election, not corporate election, we will now consider the two major views. In doing so, we will attempt to understand and simplify things and then to think outside the “box” and arrive at a biblical understanding of the matter.

II. A COMPARISON OF THE CALVINISTIC AND ARMINIAN VIEWS REGARDING THE DOCTRINE OF ELECTION

As a basis for the discussion, it seems proper to list the main passages from which the doctrine comes.

Eph 1:4-5 – ...just as He chose (*exelexato*) us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined (*proopisas*) us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will...

Eph 1:11 – In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined (*proopisthentes*) according to Him who works all things according to the council of His will.

Deut 26:18-19 – [referring to Israel’s selection in time] Also today the Lord has proclaimed you to be His special people, just as He promised you, that you should keep all His commandments, and that He will set you high above all nations which He has made, in praise, in name, and in honor, and that you may be a holy people to the Lord your God...

1 Pet 1:1-2 – To the pilgrims of the Dispersion...elect (*eklektois*) according to the foreknowledge (*prognōsin*) of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.

1 Thess 1:4 – ...knowing, beloved brethren, your election (*eklogēn*) by God.

Rom 11:5-6 – Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election (*eklogēn*) of grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work.

John 15:16 – You did not choose (*exelexasthe*) Me, but I chose (*exelexamēn*) you and appointed you that you should go and

bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name, He may give to you.

John 17:6 – I manifested Your name to the men whom You have given me out of the world. They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word.

Rom 8:29-30 – For whom He foreknew (*proegnō*), He also predestined (*proōrise*) to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined (*proōrise*), these He also called (*ekalese*); whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

A. THE CALVINISTIC VIEW: ELECTION IS *UNCONDITIONAL*

In a previous article we considered the doctrine of total depravity. This discussion proceeds assuming the reader is familiar with the Calvinist understanding of total depravity. Buswell says, “The doctrine of unconditional election follows necessarily from the doctrine of total inability.”⁶ Logically following the assertion of the doctrine of man’s total inability to believe and/or merit salvation, Calvinists insist that election is not conditioned on man’s response to the gospel but that man’s response to the gospel is conditioned on God’s pre-creation election. The Calvinist position is succinctly stated by Steele and Thomas:

God’s choice of certain individuals unto salvation before the foundation of the world rested solely in His own sovereign will. His choice of particular sinners was not based on any foreseen response or obedience on their part, such as faith, repentance, etc. On the contrary, God gives faith and repentance to each individual whom He selected. These acts are the result, not the cause of God’s choice. Election therefore was not determined by or conditioned upon any virtuous quality or act foreseen in man. Those whom God sovereignly elected He brings through the power of the Spirit to a willing acceptance

⁶ J. Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of The Christian Religion*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), 139. However, bear in mind that Calvinists and Arminians define and understand the doctrine of total depravity in a decidedly different way, as seen in our former article.

of Christ. Thus God's choice of the sinner, not the sinner's choice of Christ, is the ultimate cause of salvation.⁷

Steele and Thomas insist that foreknowledge does not mean God simply foresaw an event or a believing response to the gospel as a basis for election. Commenting on Romans 8:29 ("For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son")⁸ they say,

Calvinists contend that the passage teaches that God set his heart upon (i.e., foreknew) certain individuals; these He predestined or marked out to be saved. Notice that the text does *not* say that God *knew* SOMETHING ABOUT *particular individuals* (that they would do this or that), but it states that God *knew the individuals* THEMSELVES—those whom He *knew* He predestined to be made like Christ. The word "foreknew" as used here is thus understood to be equivalent to "foreloved"—those who were the objects of God's love, He marked out for salvation.⁹

Boettner also argues against the idea that God based His selection of certain ones on foreseen faith.

Foreseen faith and good works, then, are never to be looked upon as the cause of the Divine election. They are rather its fruits and proof. They show that the person has been chosen and regenerated. To make them the basis of election involves us again in a covenant of works, and places God's purposes in time rather than eternity. This would not be pre-destination but post-destination, an inversion of the Scripture account which

⁷ Steele and Thomas, *Romans: An Interpretive Outline* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterians and Reformed Publishing Co., 1963), 144-45.

⁸ Buswell also argues against those who "speak as though God had looked down through the ages and observed those who would be good enough to believe in His son, and had then elected to save them on the basis of their faith" (Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 2:140).

⁹ Steele and Thomas, 131, italics and all capitals in original. The discussion is amplified on pp. 131-37. Geisler argues against the idea that "foreknow" equals "foreloved" or "chosen." See fn. 42 in this article for a summary of Geisler's reasoning.

makes faith and holiness to be the consequents, and not the antecedents, of election (Eph. 1:4; John 15:16; Titus 3:5).¹⁰

He goes on to say,

The Almighty and all-sovereign Ruler of the universe does not govern Himself on the basis of a foreknowledge of things which might haply come to pass. Through the Scriptures the divine foreknowledge is ever thought of as dependent on the divine purpose, and God foreknows only because He has pre-determined. His foreknowledge is a transcript of His will as to what shall come to pass in the future, and the course which the world takes under His providential control is by the execution of His all-embracing plan.¹¹

By saying that “foreknowledge is a transcript of His will as to what shall come to pass,” Boettner equates foreknowledge with God’s eternal decree.¹²

A simple explanation of the Calvinistic position on unconditional election might be, “Because man is dead in sin, he is unable to initiate a response to God; therefore, in eternity past God elected certain people to salvation. Election and predestination are unconditional; they are not based on man’s response.”¹³ Enns expands upon the Calvinistic view:

There are six main features involved in election. (1) Election is a sovereign, eternal decree of God (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:4, 5, 11). (2) Election is necessary because of man’s fall and total depravity. It therefore reflects the grace of God, not human effort (Rom. 9:11). (3) Election is “in Christ.” From eternity past God chose believers to be united to Christ (Rom. 8:29; Eph.

¹⁰ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1977), 98. Boettner wrestles with the time-related concepts of “pre” and “post.” The time element is a major cause for misunderstanding in the doctrine of election, as we shall see.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 99. Actually, the term post-destination would probably better fit the evangelical view of corporate election discussed above.

¹² And it does seem difficult to arrive at any other conclusion, but here he departs from the idea that foreknowledge means “to fore-love” an individual. Is foreknowledge a transcript of God’s will or is it the fore-loving of an individual by God? Or, we might ask, is the fore-loving of an individual included in the transcript of God’s will?

¹³ Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 480.

1:4, 5, 11). In election God effects salvation through sending the Savior and effectually calling certain ones to salvation. (4) Election involves the salvation of the elect and the provision for their salvation. God determined to predestine, call, justify, and glorify certain ones (Rom. 8:29-30). This was planned and effected in eternity past. (5) Election and reprobation are individual, personal, specific, and particular. The pronouns in Romans 8 and Ephesians 1 emphasize the individual nature of election. (6) The goal of election is the glory and praise of God (Eph. 1:6, 12). Everything is to ascribe glory and praise to God.¹⁴

We may then summarize the Calvinistic view as follows:

- 1) God selected certain individuals *apart from any meritorious reason* which they could supply.
- 2) The election of certain individuals for salvation and not others was *based on God's sovereign will and His ultimate and hidden purpose*, not on anything God foresaw man do (neither foreseen faith nor deed).
- 3) Faith as well as repentance are *gifts* of God in grace and are the *result* of His election and regeneration, not the *cause* of His selective choice of certain men.¹⁵
- 4) The gracious power of God's regenerating Spirit creates a willing acceptance of Christ only in the elect individual with whom the Spirit chooses to work regeneration effectively.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., 482-83 (summarizing F. H. Klooster's article "Elect, Election" in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984], 348-49). Arminians would strongly disagree with the second point in this quote, arguing that it is God's grace, not works, that makes salvation possible, but that the practical possibility of individual election is the *result* of God's provision of Christ and the gospel promise that whoever believes will receive eternal life. To the Arminian, election would be the result of God's foresight of man's faith, but election would not necessitate such belief. If it did, man would not be able to believe or reject God's offer. Thus, human responsibility would be nullified.

¹⁵ Dabney argues, for instance, that faith is the fruit of regeneration, not the cause of it. See Robert L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), 607.

¹⁶ The application of His grace will be considered in a future article on "Irresistible Grace."

- 5) The ultimate cause of salvation is God's choice of the sinner, not the sinner's choice of God. This is so because man is dead in sin and no man can, of himself, appropriately respond to the gospel or believe it.
- 6) God's election took place before creation and therefore before the actual existence of anyone, elect or not.

B. THE ARMINIAN VIEW: ELECTION IS *CONDITIONAL* BASED UPON GOD'S FORESIGHT OF MAN'S RESPONSE IN FAITH TO THE GOSPEL

The Arminian view of election is contrary to the Calvinistic position. Steele and Thomas accurately state the Arminian position on conditional election:

God's choice of certain individuals unto salvation before the foundation of the world was based upon His foreseeing that they would respond to His call. He selected only those whom He knew would of themselves freely believe the gospel. Election therefore was determined by or conditioned upon what man would do. The faith which God foresaw and upon which He based his choice was not given to the sinner by God (it was not created by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit) but resulted solely from man's will. It was left entirely up to man as to who would believe and therefore as to who would be elected unto salvation. God chose those whom He knew would, of their own free will, choose Christ. Thus, the sinner's choice of Christ, not God's choice of the sinner, is the ultimate cause of salvation.¹⁷

The Second of the Five Arminian articles says,

That, agreeably thereto, Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world died for all men and for every man, so that he has obtained for them all, by his death on the cross redemption and the forgiveness of sins; yet that no one actually enjoys forgiveness of sins except the believer according to the word of the Gospel of John iii.16: "God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." And in the First Epistle of John

¹⁷ Steele and Thomas, 144-45.

ii.2: “And he is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.”¹⁸

Thiessen, of the Arminian camp, astutely asks,

Is election the sovereign act of God whereby he chose some to salvation solely on the basis of sovereign grace apart from merits or acts of the individual, or is it the sovereign act of God whereby he chose those whom he foreknew would respond to his gracious invitation? What is a working definition?¹⁹

Thiessen includes himself in the Arminian camp. Enns summarizes: “God elected those whom He knew would believe of their own free will. Election is conditional, based on man’s response in faith.”²⁰ Thiessen affirms the doctrine of election as a “sovereign act of God in grace whereby He chose in Christ Jesus for salvation all those whom He foreknew would accept Him.”²¹ He goes on to explain:

Although we are nowhere told what it is in the foreknowledge of God that determines His choice, the repeated teaching of Scripture that man is responsible for accepting or rejecting salvation necessitates our postulating that it is man’s reaction to the revelation God has made of Himself that is the basis of His election...In His foreknowledge He perceives what each one will do with this restored ability, and elects men to salvation in harmony with His knowledge of their choice of Him.²²

Thiessen asserts his first proof on his view that election is based on foreknowledge of man’s individual reaction to the gospel saying it is “in accord with Scripture (Rom. 8:28-30; 1 Pet. 1:1, 2). To say that God

¹⁸ Article 2 in “*ARTICULI ARMINIANI SIVE REMONSTRANTIA*. The Five Arminian Articles. A.D. 1610.” From Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966), 546.

¹⁹ Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, rev. Vernon D. Dorksen (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 257. We note that Thiessen, an Arminian, is zealous in preserving God’s sovereignty like the Calvinist, but in a different way.

²⁰ Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*, 481.

²¹ Henry C. Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949), 344.

²² *Ibid.*, 344-45.

foreknew all things because He had arbitrarily determined all things, is to ignore the distinction between God's efficient and His permissive decrees."²³ He says, "This would mean that in election God has decided to save those who accept His Son and the proffered salvation, and in foreordination He has determined effectively to accomplish that purpose."²⁴

We may note the following tenets of Arminianism:

- 1) God selected those for salvation *based on* His foresight/foreknowledge of the individual's response to the gospel.
- 2) The response of individual persons is one of *freedom*, not coercion. Thus the responsibility of man is affirmed (as opposed to the Calvinistic teaching of the bondage of the will and the inability of fallen man to believe).
- 3) The response of man in faith is the *logical cause*, not the result, of regeneration and is the *basis* for the prior election unto salvation.
- 4) The only condition for pre-time election of an individual is the personal response of faith which the omniscient God foresaw. Since He knows all things, He can accurately (and without chance of error) pre-select, from before the foundation of the world, those who would believe and be saved. Thus, He can elect on that basis and do so without possibility of error or uncertainty.

C. THE DILEMMA OF THE CALVINIST AND ARMINIAN POSITIONS

Both the Calvinistic and Arminian views attempt to make sense of the scriptural doctrine of divine election. Calvinists place the sovereignty of God as preeminent over man's responsibility and freedom to believe. They assert that man is unable to believe because of his spiritually dead condition so that man, left to himself, without faith and repentance being given or imposed upon him by God, would never attain eternal life. A conjectured covenant in eternity past between the Persons of the Godhead, with the Father pre-selecting certain ones from the mass of depraved humanity, serves as a basis for the Calvinistic system. Under this supposed covenant of grace, the Son would then, in the course of history, die specifically and solely for the ones the Father had so sovereignly

²³ Ibid., 345-46.

²⁴ Ibid., 345.

selected and given to the Son, and the Spirit would, in the course of the ages, effectively apply to those selected and redeemed by Christ the benefits of Christ's atoning work. In other words, the Father chose only those for whom the Son would specifically die and gave them to the Son. The Son died just for those chosen. The Holy Spirit regenerates and gives faith to the chosen and redeemed elect, thus assuring that God's sovereign plan is completed exactly as He had designed.

Arminianism, on the other hand, sees no such covenant of grace and, when confronted with the biblical teaching of the doctrine of the divine election of individuals to eternal life, sets forth the idea that God, in His omniscience, looked down through the corridors of the future, saw those who would freely and without coercion respond in faith to the gospel message, and chose them on the basis of how they would respond to the gospel. Thus Arminians hold to the sovereignty²⁵ of God, but they deny God's arbitrariness in the selection process and also defend the doctrine of human responsibility by asserting that a person's foreseen faith is the basis for such individual selection by the Father. Human responsibility would mean nothing if humans were unable to respond. Thus, Arminians see unconditional election as a misunderstanding of God's sovereignty, an elimination of human responsibility, and a disregard for God's omniscience (including His certain ability to foreknow or foresee man's response in the "history" of the future, so to speak).

So the dilemma is one of the relationship of the sovereignty of God to the free will of man. Calvinists attempt to protect God's sovereignty as a basis for the doctrine of His unconditional electing grace and Arminians attempt to preserve man's responsibility to believe by asserting the preeminence of divinely established free will as a basis for election. They do not rule out God's sovereignty, but by including human responsibility in God's sovereign plan, they diminish the seeming arbitrariness of election.

It is here that a proposal is suggested, which seems both true to Scripture and sound in its logical argumentation. It also accords with the

²⁵ Geisler, not an Arminian, defines God's sovereignty this way: "A God who is before all things, upholds all things, knows all things, and can do all things is also in control of all things. This complete control is called the sovereignty of God" (*Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election* [Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2001], 116).

essential qualities of God in the search for understanding this timeless truth.

III. GOD'S ATTRIBUTES ARE HARMONIOUS, CONSISTENT WITH HIS NATURE, AND NON-CONTRADICTORY

How are we to understand the mechanics of God's election? Is election conditional or unconditional? Does God's sovereignty rule out human freedom and impose a sort of gracious coercion upon some, but not others, or does human freedom denigrate God's sovereignty to the point that God has to elect man based upon what He pre-views man's response to be?

The answer to these questions is to be found in a consistent understanding of the very nature and attributes of God. We would likely agree that God's attributes exist and operate in a continual relationship with no disharmony whatsoever. We might not understand exactly how mercy and justice interrelate within His perfect nature, but we can be assured that they do. Based on this assumption, we perceive no contradiction by saying that God is infinite (unlimited, boundless), eternal (not bound by time), immense (not limited by either macro-space or micro-space), immutable (unchangeable), omnipotent (all powerful), omniscient (all knowing), and sovereign (in complete control). These attributes certainly work together in harmony and in accord with His perfection.

As an example of His harmonious outworking, consider God's work in the creation itself. He created the universe by the effective activation of His sovereign purpose, complete knowledge, and supreme power. He did so while retaining His separation from the confines of time and space, and without changing who He is. Nor did He diminish His power, knowledge, or perfection in any way. When He, according to His sovereign, eternal plan powerfully spoke the physical elements into existence from nothing, He must have both designed and *known exhaustively* all things, such as the atomic structure of those elements, and the relationship and interaction of one element to another. To not know all things exhaustively would leave open the possibility of mistake, which God could never make. In His omniscience, He created the various elements and designed into each atom a certain number of electrons which were then related to one another in such a way that the variation between different atoms would, among other things, alter their ability to conduct electricity (like copper, wood, glass) or take the form of liquid, solid, or

gas. The point is that the harmonious combination of God's sovereignty, purpose, power, and knowledge are clearly seen. In considering the creation this harmony certainly does not cause logical consternation in our minds. Rather, it exalts our appreciation of His perfection and clarifies His worthiness for receiving worship.

On a physical level, we can see that God's attributes are coordinated and are not contradictory. Jesus said, "If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how shall you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" (John 3:12). So, if God, in the performance of His purposeful design of the physical universe, used His coordinated and harmonious attributes without contradiction and without one attribute getting in the way of another, why could He not also so design the "spiritual" universe with the same consistency and ease? We will now observe and understand the harmonious relationship of some of God's attributes and then see how such cognition works to answer the question of divine election.

IV. THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD WHICH RELATE TO DIVINE ELECTION

A correct understanding of God's attributes which relate to the doctrine of divine election, as they work harmoniously and in accord with one another, provides the answer to the problems raised by the Calvinist and Arminian views.

A. THE ATTRIBUTE OF GOD'S INFINITY SETS THE STAGE

Whereas the doctrine of total depravity arises from misunderstanding the nature of man in regard to his ability to respond in belief when the gospel message is clearly presented, so also the doctrine of divine election is problematic simply because we fail to comprehend the nature of God. One reason for this is that man's perspective is time-bound. We naturally define events as past, present, and future. It is extremely difficult for us to think in terms of eternity. Yet when we think about God, His actions, attributes, purpose, and His eternal election, we are compelled to consider things from God's eternal point of view.

God is an infinite Being. "Infinity means that God has no bounds or limits. He is in no way limited by the universe or by time-space boundaries."²⁶ As the perfect Being, He lacks nothing that is essential to His

²⁶ Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 43. See 1 Kings 8:27; Acts 24:28.

nature.²⁷ His attributes might be defined as “qualities without which He could not be God.” For instance, lacking infinity would disqualify Him as God, because He would then be necessarily finite. But God cannot be finite. As the only infinite Being, He exists independently and is not limited, confined, or constrained by anything. Indeed any “thing” falls into the category of His “creation” and He has complete control over the “thing’s” existence. So, nothing (no thing) can possibly limit Him. The infinity of God opens our perspective of Him and sets the stage for further understanding.

B. GOD’S ETERNITY PROVIDES THE REAL PERSPECTIVE

God’s infinity, when juxtaposed with the concept of time, leads to the understanding that He is eternal. He exists in a dimension apart from time. “His existence extends endlessly backward and forward (from our viewpoint of time) without any interruption or limitation caused by succession of events.”²⁸ Another definition of God’s eternity is, “*that perfection of God whereby He is elevated above all temporal limits and all succession of moments, and possesses the whole of His existence in one indivisible present.*”²⁹ Clearly the definition separates God from time, but what is time? One dictionary says time is “a continuous measurable quantity in which events occur in apparently irreversible order,” or “an interval bounded by 2 points of this quantity; duration.”³⁰ One might define time as the measurable duration between the occurrence of two separate events. But for events to be possible things must exist, because without things, there could be no basis for an event. Something can’t be called an event without some “thing” being involved.³¹ There can be no events without existing things. And without a standard of measure based

²⁷ For instance, Jesus, as the second Person of the Trinity, can add to Himself flesh (become a man), but man-ness is not an essential quality of deity.

²⁸ Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 41.

²⁹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1941), 60, italics in original.

³⁰ “Time” in *Webster’s II New Riverside Dictionary* (New York: Berkley Books, 1984), 716.

³¹ A car accident, for instance, must involve cars and a lot of other things. The time (measurable duration) between an accident and the arrival of a police officer at the scene also involves “things.” Apart from all these “things” nothing could happen. No event is possible without things. And no duration (time) is possible without a combination of things.

on the duration between other events, there can be no determination of what the measurable duration really is.³² Now let's press it further. In order for there to be things to serve as a basis for events, things must exist in the first place. But things don't exist by and of themselves. Before God created things (matter) from nothing, there were no things. With no things, no events. With no events, no time! There was no time because there were no events between which to measure duration. We can thus conclude that God is timeless, eternal, and is "before" creation (to use a time word for a timeless existence). He simply exists outside that realm, not within it's confines. As Creator, He made the *ingredients* (things) necessary for *events* to exist, and in doing so He created the *arena* in which time might exist. But God is greater than and beyond His creation of things (and, therefore of time).³³

Now it is easy to speak of "eternity past." The apostle Paul wrote that God elected before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4), but this is only a language accommodation because of the time-bound perspective in which we exist. From our perspective it was something that happened prior to creation, but from God's perspective, it was always so. In speaking of "eternity past," we forget that God is also eternally present and eternally future because time is separate from Him. This is so simply because the Creator of things isn't bound, limited, or confined by His creation, i.e., by any thing, event, or duration between events.³⁴

The fact that God is eternal provides a perspective that is time-less.

³² One cannot say that a bus went from one city to another in an hour without using a higher, unchanging, independent standard of measure such as the duration of the earth's complete rotation on its axis. An "hour" is then calculated as 1/24 of that duration, but there needs to be an earth as well as a sun (i.e., things within creation) in order to calculate that duration.

³³ God is pure Spirit and is therefore "simple." His Spirit is singular (cf. Deut 6:4; John 4:24). He is not a combination or composition of matter and spirit. As a simple, spiritual Being without created matter as an essential attribute, He must be eternal, always existing outside the realm of time, the eternal Presence.

³⁴ John records such descriptions of the eternal, unbounded-by-time, Lord who identifies Himself saying, "'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty'" (Rev 1:8).

C. GOD'S IMMUTABILITY PROVIDES STABILIZATION

Divine election is also related to the quality of God's immutability. "Immutability means that God is unchangeable and unchanging. This does not mean that He is immobile or inactive, but it does mean that He is never inconsistent or growing or developing."³⁵ The concept of change was made popular, and perhaps originally defined, by the Greek philosopher Heraclitus who said, "Upon those who step into the same river different and again different waters flow. The waters scatter and gather, come together and flow away, approach and depart."³⁶ A river constantly changes. It's never the same. Heraclitus was speaking of that which is material, of course. Crane and Wiggins explain that, "The river is in constant flux. The waters are constantly renewed. We may even suppose that, consequently, upon this changing of constituents, the river changes in any and every property range, in depth, strength, speed, temperature, colour, noise-level, etc."³⁷ The material universe does indeed seem to be in constant flux. But change or flux in God is an impossibility.

Change is impossible in God because change can take place in either of two realms, either in the realm of *what one is* or in the realm of *what one has*. The river of Heraclitus doesn't change in what it is. It's still a river, but it does change in its elements—extensions, speed, and temperature. If I were to change from a human into a monkey, I would have changed in *what I am*. If I were to lose all my hair I would be different, but I would still be human. Now, God being immutable, cannot change either in who He is or in what He has. This is so because what God has (attributes) are simply what He is in His perfection. One could say that He *is* His attributes.

If God were to change in His being there would be only two possibilities. He would have to change either: 1) for the better, or 2) for the worse. But God is absolutely perfect (another of His attributes) and if He were to change for the worse, He would no longer be God (because anything less than perfection is imperfect). Similarly, if He were to change for the better, this would demonstrate that He had not been absolutely perfect in the first place and, thus, wouldn't have been God prior to the

³⁵ Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 43.

³⁶ Tim Crane and David Wiggins, "Metaphysics" in *Philosophy 1: A Guide through the Subject*, ed. A. C. Grayling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 235, quoting Heraclitus's fragments 12 and 91.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 235.

change for the better. So, for God to change in any of His attributes would require Him to change who He is. And so, change within God's being or nature is logically impossible. He is immutable. And if He doesn't change, then neither can His eternal viewpoint, i.e., what He knows (and therefore decrees) can't change.

That God cannot change in His nature provides stability for going further into the consideration of His omniscience.

D. GOD'S OMNISCIENCE IS THE ARENA FOR ELECTION

So, God is infinite, eternal, and immutable. He exists, therefore, in a timeless, unchanging manner, completely independent of the confines of any created thing, be it time, space, angel, or mankind. Now, consider this harmonious alignment of His eternity and His immutability with another divine attribute, His omniscience. In His eternal, unchanging existence, He knows all things exhaustively, "all things both actual and possible."³⁸ He is infinite in knowledge. A. W. Tozer reflects on God's perfect knowledge, "God knows all things perfectly, He knows no thing better than any other thing, but all things equally well. He never discovers anything, He is never surprised, never amazed. He never wonders about anything..."³⁹ We have touched upon this idea above, but now we will expand it further.

The fact that God knows all things, both possible and actual, is to understand the attribute involving infinity in regard to time. Since He is outside the realm of time, what He knows is irrespective of time. He knows all things from one eternal, all-comprehending perspective. Certainly God can enter the realm of time, but time does not bind or limit Him. As an eternal Being all time is present before His eyes. Berkhof effectively writes, "The knowledge of God may be defined as *that perfection of God whereby He, in an entirely unique manner, knows Himself and all things possible and actual in one eternal moment.*"⁴⁰

Now, if we align His immutability with the concept of eternal, unchanging omniscience, we are inclined to ask the question: When did God come to know all things, or any one thing in particular? Did He *before* the foundation of the world *acquire* His omnipotence or *arrive at* His complete, exhaustive knowledge of all things? Did He at one

³⁸ Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 47.

³⁹ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 62.

⁴⁰ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 66, italics in original.

moment, sometime prior to the creation of the universe see and observe what would happen and conclude that this was to be reality and, therefore, knows all things on that basis? Such would conform to the Arminian view. But in such a scenario God would have had to learn something. He would have had to gain more knowledge than He had possessed before. (You will notice that the words in italics in this paragraph are “time words” which are illegitimate in the realm of eternal existence). There would have had to be a changed state in God’s very being: a state of not knowing all things to a state of knowing all things.

The problem with the idea that God acquired an understanding of anything contradicts His immutable nature. He would have had to learn something He didn’t know before, and coming to a knowledge of this or that would have been a change in His knowledge. This would have meant that He didn’t know all things before He came to learn it. This would disqualify Him as God because He wouldn’t have been omniscient in the first place. With no omniscience there is no deity!

But how, then, can He be omniscient or know all things, both possible and actual, in an absolute, exhaustive, and certain manner? This is how He does it. In His unchanging nature as an all-knowing Being, God views the entirety of reality *at once* (to use a time word to describe an eternal concept again) from His eternal, ever-present perspective. He not only views all reality (which we would refer to as past, present, and future) at one time, but He knows all things at once. He always did and He always will. Neither His eternal perspective of reality nor His exhaustive knowledge of that reality (as it is resolved in the passing of time) preceded the other since that which God eternally and unchangeably knows cannot be wrong. What God perceives about reality is precisely what He knows as part of His exhaustive knowledge. Thus, God knows all things, including the outcome of the present world condition and beyond. He retains His sovereignty in time because He does not neglect the created order, but rather, directs it in its progression toward its destined end. He is now in the process of creating the best of all possible worlds as the completion of His eternal purpose.

It is not difficult to see how God can both know all things and continue working out His purpose in the realm of time. On a human level we have the ability to know something and to practice it over a period of time. For instance, many of us have memorized John 3:16 or Psalm 23 as children. We “know it by heart.” Yet, when it comes to saying it, we can’t say all of it at once, we must recite the passage one word at a time.

We know every word, but it takes time to completely recite it. As we recite the passage it is mandatory to concentrate on each word as we progress. In like manner, the eternal God knows every person, every circumstance, and every event. He acts sequentially within time to carry things toward the destined end which He has purposed.

God's omniscience is the arena for understanding the doctrine of election because whatever decree of God's exists, it is to be found in His "mind," that complete comprehension of all things, both actual and possible.

V. AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE VARIOUS VIEWS OF ELECTION

A. PROBLEMS WITH THE CALVINIST AND ARMINIAN VIEWS

In considering the views of both Calvinism and Arminianism above, we have, perhaps in a cursory way, observed that views are arguably based on Scripture, but both are positions adverse to each other. Either one is correct, the other is correct, or neither are correct. Both cannot be correct.⁴¹ The suggestion here is that neither are correct.

Problems with the Calvinistic view are: 1) the assertion of (and need for) an unspecified eternal covenant of grace as a basis for the system, 2) the assertion that faith is a gift which logically follows the regeneration of the elect, rather than a human response which is the condition for regeneration as is taught in the Bible, 3) the denial or, at least, denigration of the doctrine of human freedom and the inherent ability to believe the gospel, 4) the seeming arbitrariness of God in choosing some to be saved and, as He does so, condemning the others to hell (by either actively doing so or by passing over them with the same result), 5) the dismissal, for all practical purposes within the discussion, of the interaction of God's foreknowledge as it relates to the doctrine of election, and 6) the questionable assertion that foreknowledge equals foreloving or choosing, not the knowledge of all things from God's eternal perspective.⁴²

⁴¹ Since they are adverse and assert different truth claims, the logical law of non-contradiction rules out the possibility of both views being correct.

⁴² Geisler adequately argues against the exclusive use of God's foreknowledge by saying, "If God does know infallibly, then He would still foreknow what people freely believe, and He would still have to decide whether He would have to force them to believe in Him or else elect those He knew could be

Essentially, the Calvinist sees individual election as an exercise in the sovereign (arbitrary) mind of God which doesn't take into account His offer of salvation and the free acceptance of all who will believe in the Son.

The problems with the Arminian view might be as follows: 1) By insisting that God chose the elect based on what He foresaw from His pre-creation position, Arminians make the doctrine of election moot. What would be the point of actively electing some and not others if God simply knew how man would react? Why wouldn't God just wait and let the chips fall where they may, so to speak? It would seem that there would be no reason to even bring up or believe in the doctrine of election. Why not just say that God knew who would freely believe? In that case, there would be no divine election. The idea that election is conditioned upon what God foresees is simply no election at all. 2) In the Arminian perspective, man, in freely choosing God, does the real electing. God has no eternal or sovereign function in this matter other than to concur with what He pre-observes man's free response to be. Certainly, God *could* choose a man to be saved on that basis (as the Arminian argues), but why bother? And why bother to tell us about it? This is seen to be a denigration of God's sovereignty because, left to his free will, man could not be expected to make decisions that would lead to the completion of God's eternal purpose. God would simply take His hands off the controls. The Calvinist would argue that such destroys the doctrine of God's sovereignty and assert that some coercion by God is therefore needed. 3) The Calvinist would argue against the Arminian that since Christ died only for the elect, God knows who the elect are. To do so, He had to have chosen/designated them and given them to the Son.

persuaded to freely accept His grace" (*Chosen But Free*, 71). He continues, "there is strong evidence to show that 'foreknow' does not mean 'chose' or 'elect' in the Bible" (*ibid.*). He then refers to the use of the root *ginōskō* in Matt 25:24, John 2:24; 5:42 and continues saying, "In addition, 'foreknow' (Greek *proginōskō*) is used in the New Testament in reference to advanced knowledge of events. 'Therefore, dear friends, since you *already know* this [in advance], be on your guard...' (2 Peter 3:17; cf. Acts 2:23; 1 Peter 1:18-20). Thus the extreme Calvinist's equating of foreknowing and foreloving does not follow" (*ibid.*, 72, italics in original). Finally, he argues that "the word 'chosen' by God is used of persons who are the elect. Regarding John 6:70 he says, "Judas, for example, was 'chosen' by Christ but not one of the elect" (*ibid.*).

Another problematic area of theology is the categorization of views which view the decrees of God as having occurred in a sort of logical order. Historically theologians have tried to understand the doctrine of election, an eternal phenomenon, from a time related, or at least a logic-related perspective. Because of this, we have spent a lot of time trying to resolve whether election is based upon foreknowledge (conditioned on what man was foreseen to do) or whether regeneration is based upon a pre-creation choice by God without respect to foreseen faith. This is sometimes couched in terms of the *lapsarian* designations as to what “logical order” God used to arrive at what would be His ultimate eternal decree. The very nature of these proposals suggests that God actually had to think about it before deciding!

Chafer reviews four schools of interpretation which contend for a certain order of the elective decrees saying,

These schools are: *supralapsarian*, the *infralapsarian*, the *sublapsarian*, and the *Arminian*, the first three of these being Calvinistic. Though the defense of these varying orders concerns primarily one subject—the election of some to be saved and the leaving of others to a just condemnation—the titles by which three of these schools are identified relates them to the fall of man. The word lapsarian refers to one who believes in the doctrine that man is a fallen being.⁴³

Essentially *supralapsarianism* (Lat. for “above the fall”) is the “doctrine that God decreed both election and reprobation before the [decree] of the fall.”⁴⁴ This is an Ultra Calvinistic position which orders the decrees as follows: 1) The decree to elect some for salvation and to reprobate the rest, 2) the decree to create both elect and nonelect men, 3) the decree to allow the fall of man, 4) the decree to provide salvation to the elect, and finally, 5) the decree to apply that salvation to those elected.

The moderately Calvinistic *infralapsarian*, (“Lat. for ‘after the fall’”⁴⁵) view orders the decisions of God this way: 1) the decree to create men, 2) the decree to allow the fall of man, 3) the decree to provide

⁴³ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1976), 178. He reviews these views in 3:178-82.

⁴⁴ F. H. Klooster, “Supralapsarianism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1059.

⁴⁵ R. V. Schnucker, “Infralapsarianism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 560.

salvation for men, 4) the decree to elect those who would believe and allow the rest to remain under God's righteous condemnation, and 5) the decree to apply salvation to those who believe. In this view, the decree to elect comes *after* the decree to permit the fall of man.

The *sublapsarian* view (Lat. for "below the fall," is also moderately Calvinistic) lists the decrees thus: 1) the decree to create men, 2) the decree to allow the fall, 3) the decree to elect those who would believe and leave those who do not believe to condemnation, 4) the decree to provide salvation for man, 5) the decree to apply salvation to those who believe. Here the decree to elect also comes after the decree to allow the fall, but places the decree to provide salvation for man immediately after (*sub* or below) the decree to elect.

The Arminian view is that election follows the decree to provide salvation, and depends "on foreseen human virtue, faith, and obedience, whereas the infralapsarian view of election invests it with sovereign choice apart from any foreseen human merit whatsoever."⁴⁶

The justification used by those who pose such ideas is usually that logical order is not the same as chronological order. Everyone seems to realize that there can be no chronological order in a decree that is eternal. But logical order as asserted in the *lapsarian* arguments still represents a certain "cause and effect" relationship connecting the assertions. Cause and effect are two terms, which, when used together, suggest a chronological progression. One statement is considered to logically follow another, suggesting an order of occurrence. Charles Hodge reasons,

As all the decrees of God are one comprehensive purpose, no view of the relation of the details embraced in that purpose which does not admit of their being reduced to unity can be admitted. In every great mechanism, whatever the number or complexity of its parts, there must be unity of design. Every part bears a given relation to every other part, and the perception of that relation is necessary to a proper understanding of the whole. Again, as the decrees of God are eternal and immutable, no view of his plan of operation which supposes him to purpose first one thing and then another can be consistent with their nature. And as God is absolutely sovereign and

⁴⁶ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 3:182.

independent, all his purposes must be determined from within or according to the counsel of his own will.⁴⁷

Therefore, it would seem that the suggested logical order within the eternal decree is a spurious representation of reality. Reality is what is eternally known within the immutable, omniscient mind of God.

B. THE PROPOSED BIBLICAL VIEW OF THE CONDITIONALITY OF DIVINE ELECTION

Here is the proposed solution to the doctrine of election based on what has been established above. We have seen that God is an infinite Being whose attributes work in complete harmony with one another. He is eternal and as such is a self-existing Being having no cause and depending on nothing. Anything and everything He chooses to create is under His absolute control. So, His sovereignty cannot be questioned. He is also immutable and does not change either in His essence (who He is) or in His attributes (what He has). His essence and His attributes are one and the same. He cannot change in His eternal state for either the better or for the worse. He can't gain more knowledge or come to realize a new truth, and neither can He lose any of the knowledge that He has. To do either would violate His immutability, and therefore, His deity. We could correctly say that what God knows, He knows absolutely and eternally. That which He knows absolutely and eternally cannot be changed, for to do so would make what God knows subject to change. If God's knowledge could change, He would not have been correct in the first place, i.e., He would have been wrong and therefore not omniscient. What God knows absolutely and eternally must take place. If He has a purpose and a plan to fashion creation into the best of all possible worlds, He also must know the details of that path. So, what He knows is determined, and what is determined is the same as what He knows. We may refer to things as being "predetermined" because we are time-bound and find it hard to express any other way. But God just determines. We say "fore-know," but God just knows. What God knows, He determines, and what He determines, He knows. It could be no other way.

If we apply this understanding to God's selection of some for salvation, there could have been no point or moment in time in which God decided who the elect would be. This is because His eternal, unchanging,

⁴⁷ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1975), 2:320.

all knowing nature would not allow it. Points or moments are “time” words, and God is above and beyond the realm of time. In God’s eternal mind, therefore, there is no “before” and “after,” because the impositions of those terms are adverse to the concept of eternity. If that is the case, the question as to what came before or after (as in the lapsarian proposals) become moot. Not only does the logical progression of these proposals suggest at least a hypothetical, chronological progression of decisions in His mind, but, in so doing, depreciate and ignore what we know about God’s omniscience as related to the co-harmonious qualities of eternity, omniscience, and immutability.

Therefore, it seems best to slip out of our inadequate time-bound way of understanding election and to see that God (an eternal Being that is always in the present tense) simply *elects* (present tense) from within His eternal, ever-in-the-present-tense, nature. To be more specific, we could say that He, in His eternal, timeless presence, *always elects*, and that those whom He elects were elected, are being elected, and will forever be elected. The identity of the elect are no more certain in God’s mind at one time than at another since it takes place outside the realm of time! From our present time in history, God’s election is past, but we were no more being chosen in the past than we are being chosen now, nor are we being more chosen now than we will be chosen in the everlasting future.⁴⁸ The elect are eternally chosen. He is eternally choosing us (present tense). We could say, then, that those who God eternally and unmistakably knows as a believer, He chooses, and those who He chooses, He eternally and unmistakably knows as a believer.

Now, how does this work out in the application of salvation to the elect? This is where the purpose of God comes into the equation. It is suggested that the purpose of God is to create the best of all possible worlds and thereby accomplish the glorification of Himself in the manifestation of His mercy, grace, justice, and glorious attributes, and for time-everlasting to receive the worship and praise of which He is infinitely worthy. In the process of bringing this about, another attribute (His omnipotence) operates harmoniously. He is omnipotent and this fact, when united to His eternal, unchanging knowledge and wisdom, is not only demonstrable by the physical creation of the universe and all

⁴⁸ Note that as long as there are things, events will occur. We do not thus enter into a timeless eternity when we die or go to heaven, but rather into the realm of everlasting time.

spiritual beings (angels and man), but is being manifested within the time/space universe, i.e., as history progresses.

As an omnipotent God, He *could* enforce His will upon everyone so that man would have no choice in his actions or decisions. He could coerce and compel proper actions, but like faith, our choices are also freely made in accord with our desires and within our circumstances. But who creates the circumstances? Is not God sovereign? Cannot God, in His omnipotent sovereignty, so affect *every* circumstance of the world in which we live (as He “works all things according to His good pleasure”) so that those that He elects (notice the present tense) freely accept the truth of the gospel when it is heard? God, being omnipotent, can certainly do this with ease, and, because He is sovereign and all-wise, He can do it without violating human freedom, negating human responsibility, or denigrating human ability to believe. It is not a violation of His sovereignty to understand that God’s election (eternally existing and operating) may easily operate, not in conflict with the freedom of man, but to actually operate alongside of or in accord with man’s freedom and responsibility to believe as God affects His election in historical, progressive time.⁴⁹ He moves this world along according to His purpose and plan toward His destined end.

What God knows He determines, and what He determines He knows. This being so, those who God eternally and unmistakably knows as believers He chooses. Consequently, those who believe are those who He chooses or elects. There need be no before or after, no logical or chronological progression in His eternal knowledge, no decision to elect based on anything except for the carrying out of His eternal decree, which decree was always in place. Therefore, there is no need to 1) postulate an eternal covenant between the members of the Godhead, 2) propose a logical order in relation to whether God’s decisions followed one or the other, 3) ask the question whether or not election is based on foreknowledge or whether foreknowledge of one’s salvation is based on election. As God elects, from His eternal, present tense perspective, He also works out His sovereign purpose within the framework of history on a moment-by-moment basis. His eternal electing activity is applied throughout the progression of history, which He is controlling, and He does so *in accord*

⁴⁹ For an excellent illustration showing the possibility of harmony between human freedom and divine sovereignty, see Geisler, *Chosen But Free*, 69-70, 181-87.

with the ability of men to believe (and without coercion) when the gospel message is clearly presented, when we perceive the free offer of eternal life as most valuable and beneficial to us, and when we are fully assured and convinced by His Spirit that what God has promised, He is able to perform (cf. Rom 4:21).