

Unconditional Election: The Graciousness of Grace

I. Some Historical Context

Synod of Dort meets (1618-1619) to explicitly respond to the “five articles” of the Remonstrants—followers of Jacob Arminius (=“Arminians”).

Total Depravity:

“All people are conceived in sin and are born children of wrath, unfit for any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin. Without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to reform their distorted nature, or even to dispose themselves to such reform.”
(Canons of Dort, 3.3).¹

The point: All humans, left to themselves in their sinful nature, *will not* and *cannot* choose God.

Eph 2:1, 3: “You were dead in the trespasses and sins...by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”

Not: “All humans sin, but can still choose God if they want” (Pelagius)

Not: “All humans are depraved and sinful by nature, but God has given everyone enough grace so that now, they can choose him if they want” (modern Arminianism)

II. What is Election?

“God’s unchangeable purpose by which he did the following: before the foundation of the world, by sheer grace, according to the free good pleasure of his will, God chose in Christ to salvation a definite number of particular people out of the entire human race, which had fallen by its own fault from its original innocence into sin and ruin”

(Dort, 1.7; See also WCF 3.5–6; WLC 13).²

Some Preliminary Cautions:

“This teaching must be set forth with a spirit of discretion, in a godly and holy manner, at the appropriate time and place, without inquisitive searching into the ways of the Most High”

(Dort, 1.14)

“The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care”

(WCF 3.8)

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All biblical quotations are from the ESV.

² WCF = Westminster Confession; WLC = Westminster Larger Catechism

A.) God chooses *graciously* (=“unconditionally”)

All are equally condemned and guilty. Choosing no one would be perfectly just:

Rom 3:23 “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”

Rom 6:23 “the wages of sin is death”

Rom 8:8 “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

Eph 2:3 “[We Christians] were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind”

Any choice is therefore completely gracious. God does not choose because of *anything* about us.

Rom 9:11-13, 16: “Though [Jacob and Esau] were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’ As it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated’... So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.”

2 Tim 1:9 “[God] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace.”

Titus 3:5 “He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy”

B.) God chooses *actively*

He does not choose those whom he knows will choose him.

Because: No one can or will choose God! (Total Depravity)

Therefore: The choice is God’s before it is ours—he does not choose *because* of our faith, obedience, potential, disposition, etc., but he chooses *for the purpose* of them.

John 10:26 “You do not believe because you are not among my sheep.”

Eph 1:4 “He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.”

Eph 2:10 “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

C.) God chooses *specific people*

He does not choose a.) a way of salvation (faith in Jesus) or b.) an indefinite group of “those who choose to trust Jesus.”

God lovingly chooses a definite, unchangeable group of individuals.

John 6:37 “All that the Father gives me will come to me.”

Acts 13:48 “As many as were appointed to eternal life believed.”

Rom 8:30 “And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”

Rom 9:22–23 “[God], desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—even us whom he has called.”

Foreknowledge “pertains to the *persons* who in this elective purpose of God are the object, not of God’s bare foreknowledge, but of his *active delight*”
(Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:345).

D.) God chooses the *means to* and the *end of* salvation

He does not provide free will or forgiveness for all, and then leave us to respond.

He chooses to give salvation *as an entirety*: forgiveness, regeneration, a truly free will, faith, obedience, justification, sanctification, glorification, adoption, etc.!

Ezek 36:26–27 “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”

John 6:39, 44 “And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, *but raise it up on the last day*... No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. *And I will raise him up on the last day*.”

Rom 8:29–30, 32 “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified . . . He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, *how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*”

E.) God chooses for his glory

As the supreme Lord of the universe, God does everything for his own glory: both mercifully choosing to save some and to justly “passing over” everyone else. God’s overarching goal is not the salvation of all, but the manifestation of his own glory.

Rom 9:22–23 “[God], *desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power*, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, *in order to make known the riches of his glory* for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—even us whom he has called.”

Eph 1:3, 6, 12, 14; 2:7; 3:10, 21 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; to the praise of his glorious grace; so that we...might be to the praise of his glory; to the praise of his glory; so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace; so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known; to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations.”

III. “But...!”

A.) What about nonbelievers? This isn't fair!

Remember that “fair” would be condemnation for all! Our confessions are careful to follow Scripture in emphasizing God's positive choice to save some over his negative choice to condemn through “passing over” the rest, who (like the elect!) are guilty sinners.

Note how Paul emphasizes God's mercy in Rom 9:14–16: “What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, *‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’* So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, *who has mercy.*”

By “displaying his justice” in passing over some, God “highlights this eternal and undeserved grace of our election and brings it out more clearly for us” (Dort, I.15).

God does not tell us the reason he chooses Person A but not Person B—his ways are mysterious to us, but we can rest confidently in his justice, “with reverent adoration of these secret things” (Dort, I.18).

B.) Does this mean I can live however I want?

No—God elects to give us the “means” and the “end” (Rom 8:3–4, 11; Eph 2:8–10). By electing his people in Christ He gives them Christ's Spirit “to work in them that faith, with all other saving graces; and *to enable them unto all holy obedience*, as the evidence of the truth of their faith and thankfulness to God, and *as the way which he hath appointed them to salvation*” (WLC 32).

C.) Does this mean we shouldn't invite people to trust in Jesus?

No—We do not know who the elect are. But we can and do give a genuine, sincere invitation to anyone to trust in Jesus for salvation. God sovereignly accomplishes his goal through means: prayer, evangelism, etc.

D.) What if I'm not chosen?

Be careful about excessive navel-gazing, trying to determine if you are elect. We often need other believers to give us a more objective evaluation of our spiritual state!

But:

If you are not experiencing a strong sense of election, but continue to cling to God's promises as expressed in his Word, you “ought to continue diligently in the use of the means [God's promises in his Word], to desire fervently a time of more abundant grace, and to wait for it in reverence and humility” (Dort I.18).

If you are struggling with unbelief and sin, but you still genuinely desire to please God, you should not be afraid that you are not chosen, since the desire to please God is a sign of election: “our merciful God has promised not to snuff out a smoldering wick or break a bruised reed (Isa 42:3)” (Dort, I.18).

IV. So What?

Knowing about these “riches of his grace” (Eph 1:7) is not merely a theological exercise!

Nor is it just about “me”—God elects us “in Christ” as the head of his body—the church (Eph 1:22–23)! We are an “elect” community, and should encourage one another with the “riches” of our election. God elects every member of the church—we need each other.

As those “unconditionally elected,” we should be:

A.) Humbled — God did not choose you because you are more worthy or insightful. You deserve exactly the same as everyone else. Everything you have—material and spiritual—is purely a gift (1 Cor 4:7)!

B.) Assured — God wants us to live in assurance of his loving election. Jesus commanded his disciples to rejoice in the knowledge that their names are “written in heaven” (Luke 10:20). “Every spiritual blessing” (Eph 1:3) is either already ours, or certainly will be ours. While God works through us—the entire work of salvation remains his!

C.) Encouraged — God has elected us not merely to future salvation, but also to sanctification, i.e., growth in holiness and obedience. We respond to God’s grace with grateful obedience, but also with confidence that he has chosen to make us more and more holy (Eph 4:1).

D.) Comforted — Not only will we take comfort in God’s gracious forgiveness of our many sins (Rom 8:33), but our adoptive Father will sustain us through all suffering—he works everything together for our good (Rom 8:28)!

“If in covenant with God all things shall co-operate for your good...Not only golden paths, but his bloody paths are for good. Every wind of Providence shall blow them nearer heaven. Affliction shall humble and purify. Out of the bitterest drug God distils your salvation. Afflictions add to the saints, glory. The more the diamond is cut, the more it sparkles; the heavier the saints' cross is, the heavier shall be their crown”

(Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity*, Q20).

“Believers do not claim to comprehend all this [i.e., suffering, inexplicable disasters, hardened nonbelievers]; they do believe that the alternative—pessimism as the fruit of acknowledging the blind will of a chaotic deity—is impossible. Believers are willing to look at the disturbing reality of life; they do not scatter flowers over graves, turn death into an angel, regard sin as mere weakness, or consider this the best of possible worlds. Calvinism has no use for such drivel. It refuses to be hoodwinked. It takes full account of the seriousness of life, champions the rights of the Lord of lords, and humbly bows in adoration of the inexplicable sovereign will of God. The almighty God is also, we believe, our merciful Father. This is not a ‘solution’ but an invitation to rest in God” (Bavinck, 2:341).