

# Election and Free Will

God's Gracious Choice  
and Our Responsibility

Robert A. Peterson



P U B L I S H I N G  
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With joy I dedicate this book to two groups of Covenant  
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# Series Introduction

Believers today need quality literature that attracts them to good theology and builds them up in their faith. Currently, readers may find several sets of lengthy—and rather technical—books on Reformed theology, as well as some that are helpful and semi-popular. *Explorations in Biblical Theology* takes a more mid-range approach, seeking to offer readers the substantial content of the more lengthy books, on the one hand, while striving for the readability of the semipopular books, on the other.

The series includes two types of books: (1) some treating biblical themes and (2) others treating the theology of specific biblical books. The volumes dealing with biblical themes seek to cover the whole range of Christian theology, from the doctrine of God to last things. Representative early offerings in the series focus on the empowering of the Holy Spirit, justification, the presence of God, preservation and apostasy, and substitutionary atonement. Examples of works dealing with the theology of specific biblical books include volumes on the theology of 1 and 2 Samuel, the Psalms, and Isaiah in the Old Testament, and books on the theology of Mark, Romans, and James in the New Testament.

*Explorations in Biblical Theology* is written for college seniors, seminarians, pastors, and thoughtful lay readers. These volumes are intended to be accessible and not obscured by excessive references to Hebrew, Greek, or theological jargon.

Each book seeks to be solidly Reformed in orientation, because the writers love the Reformed faith. The various theological themes and biblical books are treated from the perspective of biblical theology. Writers either trace doctrines through the

## SERIES INTRODUCTION

Bible or open up the theology of the specific books they treat. Writers desire not merely to dispense the Bible's good information, but also to apply that information to real needs today.

Explorations in Biblical Theology is committed to being warm and winsome, with a focus on applying God's truth to life. Authors aim to treat those with whom they disagree as they themselves would want to be treated. The motives for the rejection of error are not to fight, hurt, or wound, but to protect, help, and heal. The authors of this series will be godly, capable scholars with a commitment to Reformed theology and a burden to minister that theology clearly to God's people.

ROBERT A. PETERSON  
Series Editor



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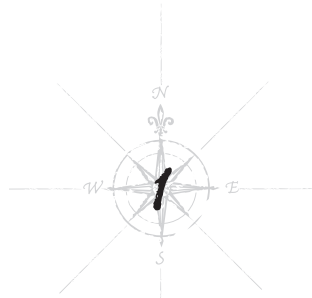
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# Why a Book on Election and Free Will?

In 1999, a theology professor wrote a book on election with the following dedication: “To all my students who for the past thirty-five years have asked more questions about this than any other topic.”<sup>1</sup> Although I disagree with many of the conclusions of that professor, I heartily agree that the subject of election, or predestination (I will use the terms synonymously), raises many questions in people’s minds. This book will try to answer many of those questions from the Scriptures. But first I must ask a basic question: why devote a book to the topic of predestination?

Today, we need a book dealing with biblical teaching on election and the related topic of free will for at least three good reasons:

- The Need for Graciousness in the Debate about Election
- The Tremendous Scriptural Witness to Election
- The Insecurity of Contemporary Life

## The Need for Graciousness in the Debate about Election

There are two main positions among Christians concerning God’s election of human beings for salvation: Arminianism and

1. Norman Geisler, *Chosen but Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1999), 5.

Calvinism. Arminians believe that God in his sovereignty and grace chooses for salvation people whom he foresees will believe in Christ. By contrast, Calvinists hold that God in his sovereignty and grace chooses people for salvation without taking their responses into account; God chooses for reasons within himself. Unfortunately, Calvinists and Arminians have not always treated each other fairly, as quotations from the following two Web sites show.

### *Calvinist Ugliness*

The first Web site is generated by a group of Calvinists seeking persons who agree with the following list of theological statements:

1. The gospel is the good news of salvation (including everything from regeneration to final glory) conditioned solely on the atoning blood and imputed righteousness of Christ.
2. Every regenerate person believes the gospel.
3. It is not possible for a regenerate person to confess a false gospel.
4. All Arminians (for the purposes of this list, an Arminian would be anyone who believes any or all of the following: partial depravity, conditional election, universal atonement, resistible grace, conditional perseverance) are unregenerate.
5. All who know what the doctrines of Arminianism are and believe that at least some Arminians are saved are unregenerate (this includes professing Calvinists who say that they remained Arminians for a time after they were regenerated or who say that some Arminians are their brothers in Christ).<sup>2</sup>

The Web site includes these words: “The few of us who believe the true gospel need to deepen our ties and encourage each other

2. Marc D. Carpenter, “From the Editor,” in *Outside the Camp* 3.3 (1999), <http://www.outsidethecamp.org/fte33.htm>.

in the faith,” and informs readers of plans to evangelize Arminians.<sup>3</sup> When I first read the words on this site, I hoped they were a bad joke. Sadly, however, the writers were very serious. As a Calvinist, I deplore the theological arrogance, religious bigotry, and lack of love evident in the above quotations.

### *Arminian Ugliness*

Calvinists do not have a corner on the market when it comes to bad attitudes toward other Christians. Some Arminians return the favor, as these words from another Web site show:

Five point Calvinists . . . typically bear fruit contrary to the teaching of God’s Word. Specifically, it is typical of five point Calvinists to ignore or at times even oppose evangelism. After all, if all of humanity is either predestined to hell or to heaven, and there is nothing anyone can do to switch from one group to the other regardless of their will, then why evangelize? The elect will be saved whether they like it or not, and the non-elect will be doomed whether they want to or not. . . . Five point Calvinists tend to speak of love and grace frequently, but display very little of either. Rather than loving and serving the lost and hurting, they are engaged in continual arguing, often dividing the Body of Christ in a legalistic and hurtful manner. . . .

Such a belief makes God a monster who eternally tortures innocent children, it removes the hope of consolation from the Gospel, it limits the atoning work of Christ, it resists evangelism, it stirs up argumentation and division, and it promotes a small, angry, judgmental God rather than the large-hearted God of the Bible.<sup>4</sup>

Ironically, although the Web site just quoted blames Calvinists for bad theology and bad fruit, the gross generalizations, misrepresentations, and absence of love evident in the quotation represent neither good theology nor good fruit.

3. Ibid.

4. Larry Taylor, *Calvinism vs. Arminianism: A Discussion of Doctrine*, Calvary Chapel Cheyenne, <http://www3.calvarychapel.com/cheyenne/Books/CVAFrCal.html>.

*An Attempt to Do Better*

Admittedly, I have chosen extreme examples of unfairness and intolerance on both sides. Most interaction between the two camps is not as extreme, but still is lacking in courtesy. An example is found in the writings of Norman Geisler and James R. White on the topic of election. In 1999, Geisler wrote *Chosen but Free*, a book on election in which he, among other things, strongly opposed traditional Calvinism. James White was agitated by Geisler's book and wrote a reply titled *The Potter's Freedom: A Defense of the Reformation and a Rebuttal of Norman Geisler's Chosen but Free*.<sup>5</sup> White's book in turn prompted Geisler, in a second edition of his work, to add an appendix, "A Response to James White's *The Potter's Freedom*."<sup>6</sup>

Although these men are generally courteous toward one another, they are not above emotive language and even name-calling in presenting each other's positions. For example, the Calvinist White, offended by Geisler's characterization of Calvinism, strings together several of Geisler's most inflammatory anti-Calvinist comments in a rhetorically loaded opening salvo:

This system [Calvinism] seems particularly pernicious in Dr. Geisler's view. . . . It can "have a devastating effect on one's own salvation, to say nothing of one's enthusiasm to reach others for Christ." This belief even lays the ground for universalism, undermines trust in the love of God, and in so doing has even been the "occasion for disbelief and even atheism for many." The God presented by adherents of this system "is not worthy of worship" and "does not represent God at all. . . ." This system is at its heart "theologically inconsistent, philosophically insufficient, and morally repugnant."<sup>7</sup>

5. James R. White, *The Potter's Freedom: A Defense of the Reformation and a Rebuttal of Norman Geisler's Chosen but Free* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 2000).

6. Norman Geisler, *Chosen but Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001), 252–63.

7. White, *The Potter's Freedom*, 17–18.

But if White is irritated at his opponent, Geisler is certainly no less so. Indeed, in the second edition of his book he devotes a lengthy appendix to the sole purpose of rebutting White in equally provocative language (using the abbreviation *PF* for White's *The Potter's Freedom*):

Sometimes my view is so distorted by stereotype that it seems almost impossible to believe that *PF* had my book in mind . . .

*I counted no less than forty times my view was misrepresented . . . This failure to comprehend my position does not impede in the least the overly zealous, pedantic, and at times somewhat arrogant critique of it in PF . . .*

*PF's favorite name-calling device is what its author believes is the theologically toxic word, "Arminian" . . .*

*I am not alone in detecting a proud and exclusivistic undertone in PF . . .*

*By distorting the obvious, caricaturing the opposing, and sidestepping the difficult, PF futilely attempts to make the implausible sound plausible and the unbiblical seem biblical.<sup>8</sup>*

Too often, the debate between Calvinists and Arminians has failed to glorify God, promote understanding, or foster honor for one another as fellow members of the body of Christ. I could easily multiply examples, but will refrain in a desire to edify. I aim, however, to treat my Arminian brothers and sisters in Christ as I would want to be treated. Toward that end, I will use the best sources for Arminian theology, will acknowledge the truths that we share in common as evangelical Christians, and will endeavor to appreciate the valid concerns of Arminian Christians. Nevertheless, I am a Calvinist and, while admitting that no theology has all the answers and that my position has weaknesses, will make the best case for Calvinism that I can. That case begins by demonstrating how much the Bible says about election or predestination.

8. Geisler, *Chosen but Free*, 2nd ed., 254, 256, 262–63 (italics in original).

## The Tremendous Scriptural Witness to Election

A second reason why a book on election and free will is needed today is that many Christians are unaware of the tremendous number of scriptural passages that speak of God's electing people. As a result, many have neglected a significant biblical theme. I will quote a sampling of passages (and list many others) dealing with the election of Israel, Christ, and the church.

### *God's Election of Israel*

Numerous passages speak of God's choosing Israel alone, out of all the nations on the earth, to belong to him.

He loved your fathers and chose their offspring after them and brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power, driving out before you nations greater and mightier than yourselves, to bring you in, to give you their land for an inheritance, as it is this day. (Deut. 4:37–38)

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deut. 7:6–8)

Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the LORD set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day. (Deut. 10:14–15)

Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD,  
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage! (Ps. 33:12)



But you, Israel, my servant,  
    Jacob, whom I have chosen,  
    the offspring of Abraham, my friend;  
you whom I took from the ends of the earth,  
    and called from its farthest corners,  
saying to you, “You are my servant,  
    I have chosen you and not cast you off”;  
fear not, for I am with you;  
    be not dismayed, for I am your God;  
I will strengthen you, I will help you,  
    I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Isa. 41:8–10)

Many other passages also deal with the election of Israel, including Deuteronomy 14:2; 1 Kings 3:8; 1 Chronicles 16:13; Psalms 105:6, 43; 106:5; 135:4; Isaiah 44:1–2; 45:4; Acts 13:17; and Romans 11:28–29.

### *God’s Election of the Messiah*

Although the majority of the election passages in Scripture concern God’s choice of Israel and his choice of the church, a few passages speak of God’s choosing the Messiah.

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,  
    my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my Spirit upon him;  
    he will bring forth justice to the nations. (Isa. 42:1)

Behold, my servant whom I have chosen,  
    my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. (Matt.  
    12:18)

And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!” (Luke 9:35)

And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” (Luke 23:35)

He was foreknown before the foundation of the world . . . , a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious. (1 Peter 1:20; 2:4)

### *God's Election of the Church*

An abundance of passages from all parts of the New Testament tell of God's election of individuals and of the Christian church. I will quote ten and list almost three times that many.

And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. (Matt. 24:22)

I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. (John 17:9)

And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. (Acts 13:48)

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. (Rom. 8:29–30)

What if 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? (Rom. 9:22–23)

He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose

of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. (Eph. 1:4–6)

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, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. (Eph. 1:11–12)

[God] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began. (2 Tim. 1:9)

Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. (2 Peter 1:10)

And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast. (Rev. 17:8b)

Other predestination passages in the New Testament: Matthew 22:14; 24:24, 31; Mark 13:20, 22, 27; Luke 18:7; John 6:37; 13:18; 15:16, 19; 17:2, 6, 24; Acts 18:9–10; Romans 8:33; 9:10–13; 11:5, 7; Colossians 3:12; 1 Thessalonians 1:4; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 2:10; Titus 1:1; James 2:5; 1 Peter 1:1–2; 2:9; 5:13; and Revelation 17:14.

If nothing else, the sheer volume of biblical data on divine choosing, electing, and predestinating demands that we give thoughtful attention to the subject. Unfortunately, throughout the long history of this doctrine, some have paid it too little attention (thereby missing an important biblical point), and others too much (thereby distorting other parts of their theology). Our goal is to give election the amount and type of attention that Scripture itself does. We will take care to note the ways in which predestination relates to other biblical truths and the ways in which the Scriptures use the doctrine of predestination.

## The Insecurity of Contemporary Life<sup>9</sup>

A third reason why Christians need to read a book on election and free will is the insecurity of much of contemporary life. Ironically, although the doctrine of election has sometimes been accused of unsettling people, within the Bible its function is largely to comfort the people of God and assure them that underneath all their meager efforts to live for him are God's everlasting arms to hold, protect, and caress them. This is as important today as ever because of the many reasons why people feel insecure.

### *Dysfunctional Families*

One need not look far for examples of family dysfunction; most of us can point to instances in our own families. I think of one student at our seminary whose father left when he was a young boy and who was then raised by his alcoholic single mom. Now barely into his twenties, he and his wife of three years are in the awkward position of looking after his chronically unstable mother. When she comes to stay with them, they have to hide whatever alcohol and money there may be in the house to eliminate any possibility of further dissipation on her part. The young seminary couple is quite willing to help out in this way, but their pain is understandably great.

I also think of a young woman in our church who was raised by her mentally ill mother after the father left the family. By God's grace, the young woman made it to college, where she met and married a Christian man. About the same time, however, her mother was institutionalized by the state, leaving behind a five-year-old daughter (my friend's younger sister) on the street. When it became clear that the little girl's only options were homelessness or foster care, the new bride undertook to adopt her own younger sister. Thankfully, the adoption has gone through, which was the best possible outcome given the situa-

9. I am pleased to acknowledge Matthew V. Novenson, my former teaching assistant, for providing considerable help in writing the remainder of this chapter.

tion. But even so, the difficult process left the mother furious, the little girl emotionally scarred, and the newlywed couple spread very thin.

And these unhappy cases are not atypical. Less than a quarter of my evangelical Christian friends have avoided the pain of divorce among their relatives. My purpose is not to add to the guilt of divorced persons but to point to the heavy toll that divorce is taking on today's families. The former certainties of solid extended families living in the same town are distant memories for many. In such a situation, we must ask: are there aspects of God's truth, including election, that can help mend broken hearts?

### *Technological Loneliness*

A friend named Susan recently took an overseas flight on a major international airline. Because it had been a number of years since she had flown that far, one feature of the flight took her by surprise. She had expected to hear the usual chatter between seatmates all over the plane, perhaps even to get to know the person in the seat next to her. You can imagine Susan's surprise, then, when as soon as they were in the air, all the people on the plane were sitting silent, headphones on, eyes fixed on the small screen in the back of the seat in front of them. On that eight-hour flight, she heard scarcely a word exchanged between passengers. With their private movie screens and headphones, they were entertained, yes, but at the expense of any significant human interaction.

The airplane story is a mundane example of a phenomenon that is widespread in our day—technological loneliness. True, technology adds all sorts of wonderful conveniences to our lives, but the very machines that have made modern life so much easier have made it harder for us to spend meaningful time with other people. Computers have changed the way we live for the better but have also brought new problems into our lives. Wives fight to save their marriages to husbands who are addicted to computer pornography. Some people become so enamored of the latest

technological gadgets that their personal relationships suffer. We are more adept at controlling our world than our forebears were, but have we sacrificed intimacy for technological wizardry? In an impersonal technological culture, might the message of God's personal control over people's lives meet a deeply felt need in their hearts?

### *Fear of Terrorism*

A thirty-something-year-old woman in St. Louis, living the homosexual lifestyle and simultaneously dabbling in religion, was deeply disturbed by the news that hijackers had crashed planes into the World Trade Center buildings on September 11, 2001. For days after the attack, she was plagued by feelings of overwhelming fear and uncertainty. She found herself unable to concentrate on even the most routine of daily tasks.

During this time, the woman happened to be browsing one day in a sidewalk bookstore when she came upon a popular Christian book on biblical prophecy. Much of the book was incomprehensible to her, but the basic idea of a God who held the future safely in his powerful hands affected her profoundly. She could not seem to get the idea out of her head. It was just the sort of thing she had been longing to hear, and now here was a book saying that it was not just wishful thinking, but in fact the very truth about the universe.

That paperback set off a remarkable chain of events in the woman's life. Intrigued by the author's vision of a God who is sovereign over the affairs of the world, she searched the Internet for the author's name and church affiliation. This led her to an evangelical ministry for people in the homosexual lifestyle. That ministry referred the woman to an evangelical church in St. Louis, a church that taught the same doctrine of divine sovereignty that had first caught her attention in the sidewalk bookstore. At that church she heard the gospel, came to saving faith in Christ, and came to know the God who holds the future in his hands.

Greater airport security increases our sense of safety but at the same time reminds us of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. When the towers collapsed, a friend of mine lost six men whom he was discipling. Our world has been changed by 9/11; new fears have been introduced into American life. Does God's Word concerning his control of all things, including salvation, speak to such fears?

### *Radical Autonomy*

Richard Bauckham, in his perceptive book *God and the Crisis of Freedom*, sums up the false notion of freedom that is dominant in the West:

In its sublimest form the modern myth of humanity's godlike freedom . . . forms the background to virtually all concrete thinking about freedom. It means that freedom is felt to be opposed to all limits. Freedom means the ability to determine oneself however one wishes by making any choices without restriction. In contemporary Britain this kind of freedom is thought to be available in two major forms: freedom of opportunity and freedom of consumer choice.<sup>10</sup>

In describing Great Britain, Bauckham also describes America and the rest of the Western world. Many regard true freedom as freedom to choose their work and lifestyle and freedom to buy more and more of what they want. For many, however, the endless pursuit of such autonomy has resulted in increasing dissatisfaction. The more we acquire, the more we become aware of the emptiness of modern life. How does the modern notion of radical autonomy square with Scripture? What does God say about true freedom? How does true freedom relate to God's sovereign control and election?

In short, contemporary life is characterized by much insecurity in a variety of spheres. We have only briefly discussed

10. Richard Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom: Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 33–34.

family dysfunction, technological loneliness, fear of terrorism, and radical autonomy. These are some of the most obvious and most important forms of modern insecurity, but by no means do they exhaust the list. This generation is well acquainted with the feeling that the world is lurching out of control, and it is therefore also well suited for the biblical message about a God who sovereignly works all things for the good of his people.

## Conclusion

There is a real need, then, for a fresh look at the Bible's teaching concerning election and free will for at least three reasons. First, Calvinists and Arminians have frequently not debated the issues fairly and respectfully. Second, to the surprise of some, a great many scriptural texts treat the subject of election. To shun the topic of election, therefore, is to ignore much of the Bible. And third, many factors have produced insecurity in contemporary life. If we will only listen, God's Word offers great confidence and comfort when it reveals the purposes of predestination and the makeup of true freedom.

A road map is in order: After surveying the ideas of key figures in church history about election (chapter 2), we will explore what the various parts of the Bible say (chapters 3 to 7). Next we will consider the vital topic of free will (chapter 8). We will conclude by telling the Bible's story of predestination and underscoring the ways in which God wants the message of election to affect our lives (chapters 9 and 10).