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ALL ARE ELECT, FEW ARE ELECT: UNDERSTANDING NEW TESTAMENT ELECTION LANGUAGE

GLEN SHELLRUDE

ALLIANCE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, 1 SOUTH BOULEVARD, NYACK, NY 10960 U.S.A.
Glen.Shellrude@nyack.edu

The challenge of understanding the election language of the New Testament is evidenced by the diversity of approaches.[1] Traditional approaches to election language understand it as focusing on the concept of 'selection'.

In the Arminian-Wesleyan tradition election language is understood as describing God's selection of individuals for salvation based on a foreknowledge of who will believe. [2] A modern Arminian-Wesleyan alternative is to understand election in corporate terms, i.e. individual believers become elect as they are incorporated into the people of God.[3]

Each of these approaches has significant problems. Interpreting election as based on a foreknowledge of who will believe requires understanding *foreknowledge* in Romans 8:28 and 1 Peter 1:1 as 'prior knowledge of who will believe' and then using this as the key to unlocking the meaning of all uses of election language in the New Testament. This approach downplays the evidence which suggests the word *foreknowledge* itself is another way of speaking about *election*.[4] The other difficulty is that this

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[1] For an excellent presentation of traditional views, cf. Chad Brand, ed., *Perspectives on Election: Five Views* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006).

[2] E.g. Jack W. Cottrell, 'The Classical Arminian View of Election,' in *Perspectives on Election*, pp. 70-134.

[3] E.g. William Klein, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); Clark Pinnock, 'Divine Election as Corporate, Open, and Vocational', *Perspectives on Election*, pp. 276-314. Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove/Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2006), pp. 181-5, points out that Arminius and many in this tradition affirm both an unconditional corporate election and a conditional personal election based on foreknowledge. It appears that modern exponents of the corporate view eliminate the element of individual election based on foreknowledge.

[4] cf. Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (BEC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 451-2; Douglas Moo, *Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 532-3; I. Howard Marshall, *1 Peter* (IVPNTC; Downers Grove/Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1991), p. 31: 'Foreknowledge...has the sense of choice and love rather than knowledge.' Grant Osborne, *Romans*

understanding of election eviscerates the grace component of election language by reducing it to God's ratification of human decisions which he foresees.[5] The corporate framework is attractive but lacks exegetical support. The most important election texts focus on the believer as the object of God's election, though within a corporate context. In the New Testament believers are the object of God's adoption, justification, sanctification, redemption, reconciliation, glorification and election. The corporate framework involves reading a great deal into the text in order to make the hypothesis work.

Those within the Calvinist tradition interpret election language as describing the unconditional selection of a subset of humanity for salvation. [6] This seems plausible since the word group conveys the meaning of *choice/selection*. However this approach is implausible in light of two widely attested theological affirmations in the New Testament: (1) God

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(IVPNTC; Downers Grove/Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 221-2, acknowledges the strength of the case for this view but argues for the meaning 'prior knowledge of'.

[5] Pinnock, *Divine Election*, p. 281: 'Seeing in advance our future conduct, God sets us on the way to salvation or perdition on the basis of our own free and foreseen decisions. Divine election rests on God's knowledge of the future free choices of human beings. In effect then, God endorses our self-election. We choose God and God returns the compliment....it reduces the meaning of election as an unconditional act of God's grace....It turns God's election into a human act of self-election.'

[6] E.g. Paul Jewett, *Election and Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); Bruce Ware, 'Divine Election to Salvation: Unconditional, Individual, and Infralapsarian,' in *Perspectives on Election*, pp. 1-58; For a volume of representative essays arguing a Calvinist perspective cf. Bruce Ware and Thomas Schreiner, eds., *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

desires the salvation of the whole of humanity;[7] (2) apostasy is a real possibility.[8]

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[7]   Matt. 22:14; Luke 2:10; John 1:7, 9, 29, 36; 3:16; 4:42; 5:23; 6:45; 11:48; 12:32; Acts 17:30; 22:14; Romans 5:15-19; 10.11-13; 11.32; 2 Cor. 5:14, 19; Phil. 2:11; Col. 2:20; 1 Tim. 2:4; Titus 2:11; 2 Pet. 3:9; 1 John 2:2; Rev. 22:17. Cf. I. Howard Marshall, 'For all, for all my Saviour Died', in *Semper Reformandum: Studies in Honour of Clark H. Pinnock*, ed. by Stanley Porter and Anthony Cross (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), pp. 322-46. Calvinist interpreters readily acknowledge that the texts affirming God's universal salvific will represent a challenge to their understanding of election but at times do not acknowledge the challenge posed by the warnings against apostasy. Thus, for example, Jewett, *Election*, pp. 102-5, 115-20, addresses the challenge posed by 'universal texts' but not the warning texts. Cf. also Ware, *Election to Salvation*, pp. 26-42, who responds to five objections to the Calvinist understanding of election without mentioning the warning texts. The irony of this is that there are more texts which assume the possibility of apostasy than ones affirming God's universal salvific will.
      Calvinist interpreters use a variety of strategies to deal with the texts stating that God desires that all be saved: (1) restricting the 'all' to 'all the elect'; (2) defining 'all' as 'all kinds of people' from every sector of society; (3) interpreting the intention as being that salvation is not just for the Jew but also the Gentile; (4) distinguishing between what God 'desires' and what he 'ordains'. For this last approach cf. Thomas Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman, 2003), pp. 380-83. Schreiner acknowledges that 2 Peter 3:9 and other New Testament texts affirm that God desires that the whole of humanity be saved. However he argues that while God does indeed *desire* the salvation of all but that he *ordains* to make salvation possible only for a limited number. Cf. also Ware, *Divine Election*, pp. 32-5. John Piper, 'Are There Two Wills in God?', in *Still Sovereign*, pp. 107-13, has developed the fullest defence of this construct. For an analysis and critique of Calvinist determinism cf. Roger Olson, *Against Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011); Jerry Walls and Joseph Dongell, *Why I Am Not A Calvinist* (Downers Grove/Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2004); Glen Shellrude, 'Calvinism and Problematic Readings of New Testament Texts', *Journal For Baptist Ministry and Theology*, 8/1 (2011), 69-85.

[8]   I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1969), is the best analysis of the relevant texts. Stephen Ashby, 'A Reformed Arminian View', in *Four Views on Eternal Security*, ed. by J. Matthew Pinson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), pp. 137-87, has an excellent, concise discussion of the issues (cf. pp. 170-80 for a summary analysis of the Biblical texts). For a Calvinist perspective cf. Thomas Schreiner, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Falling Away* (Downers Grove/Leicester, InterVarsity Press, 2001).

ELECTION AS GRACIOUS INITIATIVE

This paper will argue that New Testament election language focuses not on the concept of *selection* but rather on the idea of *gracious initiative* as the basis for one's status as a believer.[9] Election language affirms that in his love and grace God has taken the initiative to reach out, to invite, to extend the grace that enables a response of faith, and brought into his family all who say yes to his gracious invitation, to his election. Since the New Testament affirms God's desire that all come to him, in principle all are elect. However election language is only applied to those who have responded to God's gracious initiative, to his election. It will also be argued that the election texts are applied to those who are already believers and there is no suggestion in the contexts that unbelievers are unbelievers because God has not elected them. The primary intent of election language is to emphasize the utter gratuity of God's taking the initiative for the believer's salvation. Election language also affirms the related truths that believers are deeply loved by God and stand in a special relationship to him.

FOUR SUPPORTING ARGUMENTS

There are a number of arguments which support the conclusion that election language is not about the selection of a subset of humanity for salvation but instead affirms the gracious initiative of God as the basis for the believer's status.

First, the use of election language by Jesus and the early Church has been shaped by the election language of the Old Testament. In the Scriptures Israel is the object of God's election (e.g. Deut 7:6; Isa. 41:8-9). Within this context election was a purely corporate concept and did not speak to the issue of the salvation of the individual Jew. The early church took this Scriptural language of election and applied it to the soteriological status of individuals in a way which was not done in the Old Testament. This is in line with the appropriation of Scriptural language to describe believers in a new covenant context.[10] In the Old Testament context election

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9   I owe this approach to understanding election language to I. Howard Marshall: 'The Problem of Apostasy in New Testament Theology', in *Jesus the Saviour: Studies in New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove/Leicester: IVP Press, 1990), p. 320. Cf. also I. Howard Marshall, 'Predestination in the New Testament,' *Jesus the Saviour*, pp. 290-305, for a related essay.

10   Believers can be described as 'the twelve tribes' (Rev. 7:4; Jas. 1:1; cf. 1 Pet. 1:1), the 'Israel of God' (Gal. 6:16; cf. Eph. 2:12f), a 'holy nation' (1 Pet. 2:9), 'a temple' (1 Cor. 3:16f; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21), 'a kingdom and priests' (Rev. 1:6), 'a Jew' (Rom. 2:28), 'a holy/royal priesthood' (1 Pet. 2:5, 9); 'the circum-

language did refer to God's unconditional selection of Israel from among the nations as those who would constitute his people.[11] Calvinists assume a straightforward transference of meaning so that election language in the New Testament describes God's unconditional selection of a subset of humanity for salvation. Instead of God choosing one nation from among all the nations, God now chooses some individuals to the exclusion of others. However as already stated, the New Testament emphases on both the universal scope of God's salvific will and the possibility that the elect can commit apostasy are evidence that this was not how the early church understood its use of election language.

Two factors would have provided the catalyst for reshaping how the election language of the Old Testament was understood within a new covenant context. One was a new understanding of God's redemptive initiative. In the Old Testament election was not a possibility open to all nations since God had chosen Israel. The gracious initiative of God had a single nation as its object. In the New Testament God's gracious initiative is now universal in its scope rather than focused on Israel. God desired that all become part of his people. The broadening of God's redemptive initiative from Israel to the world would naturally be accompanied by a broadening of the understanding of election language. Since God's gracious initiative now extended to all, the status of being one of the elect was now a possibility open to all who responded to the Gospel.[12]

The other factor requiring a new understanding of election language was that the people of God were now defined not on the basis of national

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cision' (Phil. 3:3), 'Abraham's seed' (Gal. 3:29), 'beloved' (e.g. Rom. 1:7; Col. 3:12), 'saints' (e.g. 1 Cor. 1:2), 'called' (e. g. 2 Pet. 1:10). In many cases where language fashioned to describe the nation of Israel is re-applied to Christians there is a shift in meaning when used in this new context. Thus, for example, believers in a new covenant context are not 'the twelve tribes', 'the Israel of God', 'a temple', 'a holy nation', 'a Jew', 'a holy/royal priesthood', 'Abraham's seed' or 'the circumcision' in precisely the same way that was true when this language was originally used with reference to historic Israel.

[11] While Israel's election (selection) as the covenant people is presented as an unconditional act, God had specific expectations for how Israel was to function as his people. Furthermore there was the expectation that God would act through Israel to bring blessing to the world.

[12] In the Second Temple Period provision was made for those who were not Jews by birth to embrace Judaism through conversion and thus benefit from all the blessings that attached to being part of God's elect people. One could argue that Jesus and the early church inherited an implicitly more open understanding of election in that Gentiles, 'the non-elect', could become one of the elect people through a decision to embrace the Jewish faith.

identity but on the basis of those who responded positively to the Gospel. In the Old Testament being one of the elect was a matter of birth not choice. However now being one of the elect was premised on a person's faith response to the Gospel. The question is how election language would be understood in this new context. The Calvinist answer that election language now means that only individuals unconditionally selected by God could respond positively to the Gospel is impossible for reasons given. The argument here is that within the context of new covenant realities election language was retained because it expressed the fact that God's gracious, loving initiative was what enabled every response to the Gospel.

Second, election language is part of a broader vocabulary whose intention is to speak of God's special love for and relationship with his people as well as his initiative in the entire process of salvation. Believers are described as 'beloved' (e.g. Rom. 1:7; Col. 3:12), 'sheep' (John 10), 'saints' (e.g. Col. 1:2), 'adopted' (e.g. Eph. 1:5), 'called' (e.g. Rom. 1:7), 'heirs' (Rom. 8:17), and 'elect'. Jesus and the early church proclaim that this special relationship to God is available to anyone who responds positively to God's grace.

The New Testament describes believers as 'beloved' of God (e.g. Rom 1.7; 1 Thess. 1:4; 2 Thess. 2:13; Col. 3:12). It would be wrong to infer from this that unbelievers are not loved by God, especially in light of the explicit affirmation that God loves all without distinction (John 3:16). However the status of 'beloved' is reserved for those who respond to God's love.

When the NT describes believers as 'adopted', one could infer that God decided to adopt some and not others. However this inference is never drawn. It is more likely that this is one of several terms used to express the fact that the special status of believers is rooted in God's grace. This status in turn is available to all who respond to the Gospel.

The New Testament also describes believers as those who have been 'called'. If the language is taken literally, the conclusion could be drawn that unbelievers are those who have 'not been called'. But this would be an unwarranted inference. As already stated, the early church believed that 'all are called', that all are invited to embrace the Gospel (e.g. Matt. 22:14; in Rom. 10:11-13 the opportunity is there for 'all to call upon him'). However the status of being one of the 'called' is applied to those who have responded positively to the Gospel. Unbelievers are not those whom God has decided not to call. The point is that the status of being 'adopted', 'called', 'beloved' and 'elected' are possibilities open to all who respond to God.

It is significant that a number of these terms used to describe believers express the concepts that their status 1. is based on God's loving initiative, 2. is an utterly gracious gift, and, 3. entails a special relationship with God.

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This is true for the terms 'adopted', 'called', 'beloved' and 'heirs'. This is contextual evidence that election language has these concepts in view, especially when there are cases when election language and concepts are related to these other terms and concepts in some texts: calling and election (Rom. 8:28-29; 9:11-12, 23-24; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; 1 Pet. 2:9; 2 Pet. 1:10; Rev. 17:14), love and election (Eph. 1: 4f; Col. 3:12; 1 Thess. 1:4; 2 Thess. 2:13; Rom. 9:25; 11:28), adoption and election (Eph. 1:4-5), grace and election (Eph 1:4-6; 2 Tim. 1:9; 1 Pet. 2:9f); heirs and election (Eph. 1:11, 14). The focus of this language is to affirm that the gracious initiative of God is the basis for their loved and special status. The contextual evidence does not suggest that it also indicates the 'non-selection' of unbelievers.

It is true that some terms such as 'beloved', 'called', and 'saints' are more easily understood as open categories (for all men and women) than is the case for the word 'elect'. At the level of human usage the language of election suggests that some have 'not been selected'. However it needs to be kept always in mind that the language of election is used for believers in the New Testament because it was a 'Scriptural term', i.e. it was widely used in the Old Testament for God's people. Given that the early church was using a Scriptural term in a new way, i.e. to describe the soteriological status of individual believers, it is not surprising that the category of 'the elect' is also an open category in that anyone can become 'one of the elect'. The question as to whether the 'elect' is an open category or a closed, fixed category needs to be determined not by the normal meaning of the word in non-theological usage but by contextual indicators in New Testament texts as to how the early church was using this language to describe a theological reality.

A third consideration, related to the previous one, is that language of election is part of a broader category of soteriological terms. In most instances soteriological terminology in the New Testament is applied to those who are already believers. However there are texts which indicate that the following soteriological categories are open to each and

every person: reconciliation,[13] justification and life,[14] being a recipient of God's mercy,[15] the confession of Jesus as Lord,[16] the gift of eternal life,[17] salvation,[18] and the benefits of Christ's sacrificial death.[19] In view of this

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[13]   In Colossians 1:23 Paul says to the Colossian believers that 'he has reconciled you'. This follows on the statement in 2:20 that God's purpose in Christ was 'to reconcile *all things* to himself' (also 2 Cor. 5:19: 'God was reconciling the *world* to himself in Christ'). The assumption is that the potential is there for 'all to be reconciled'. However one only becomes 'one of the reconciled' when there is a response to the Gospel. P. T. O'Brien, *Colossians-Philemon* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1982), pp. 56-7, and Douglas Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Pillar; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 136-7, follow F. F. Bruce in arguing that universal reconciliation is a reality because there are two kinds of reconciliation: (1) a positive restoration of relationship; (2) a subduing of enemies. This interpretation keeps their Calvinist assumptions intact, i.e. God's purposes are always realized. But where is the evidence that reconciliation language was ever used to describe the defeat and subduing of enemies? When Paul says in 2 Cor 5:19 that 'God was reconciling the world to himself' does he mean both that he restores some to a positive relation-ship and pacifies or subdues those who do not believe? For a study of recon-ciliation language cf. I. Howard Marshall, 'The Meaning of "Reconciliation"', *Jesus the Saviour*, pp. 258-74.

[14]   In Romans 5:15-19 Paul says that on the basis of what Christ has done 'justi-fication' and 'life' come to 'all'. The context of Pauline theology indicates that this potential is only realized in those who respond to the Gospel. But the possibility is there for all to embrace the gifts of 'justification and life'. Cf. also 1 Cor. 15:22: 'For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive'; Rom. 3:23: 'all have sinned...and are justified'. This text is often used to support a theology of universal salvation, e.g. Thomas Talbot, 'Universal Reconciliation and the Inclusive Nature of Election,' in *Perspectives on Election*, pp. 231-35. This is only possible if one reads these statements in isolation from the total context of Pauline theology.

[15]   In the New Testament believers are normally described as the recipients of God's mercy. However Romans 11:32 affirms that *all* are the objects of God's merciful purpose.

[16]   In Pauline idiom it is believers who acknowledge Jesus as 'Lord'. However Philippians 2:11 states God's purpose and desire is that all acknowledge Jesus as Lord.

[17]   In the Gospel of John 'eternal life' is promised to believers. However John 3:16 affirms that the possibility of eternal life is open to all.

[18]   The language of 'salvation' is normally applied to believers. However other texts state that God desires that all embrace his salvation (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9).

[19]   In Romans 3:25 it is believers who benefit from Christ being a *hilastērion* (a wrath averting, sin cleansing sacrifice in fulfilment of what the mercy seat represented). 1 Cor. 5:14 states 'one died for all'. In 1 John 2:2 the author says

it follows that, by extension, all soteriological categories in the New Testament are in principle equally universal in their scope, e.g. redemption, new creation, adoption, sanctification, election and predestination. The status of being one of the elect is open to all who respond to God's grace.

Fourth, one must also take into consideration the metaphorical and analogical character of language that is drawn from the context of human experience and used to express theological concepts.

To take one example, with respect to the language of being an *heir* there are multiple points of discontinuity. In human experience receiving the inheritance follows the death of the one from whom the inheritance comes, but at a theological level it is the recipient of the inheritance who must first die. In human experience an inheritance only goes to carefully selected individuals while at a theological level the opportunity of being an heir is open to all. At the level of human usage receiving an inheritance is not premised on agreement to being an heir while at a theological level one must say yes to the offer of an inheritance.

There are also discontinuities in the use of *adoption* language. In human experience parents are selective in who they adopt, but at a theological level the status of adoption is open to all. In human experience being adopted does not require the consent of the baby or child, but at a theological level one must say yes to the invitation to an adopted status.[20]

In the case of election language it is true that the word normally signifies a selection or choice which necessarily excludes other possibilities.[21] Furthermore the word election does not normally take into account the

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that Christ is a *hilasmos* (wrath averting, sin cleansing sacrifice) not just for believers but for the 'the sins of the whole world'.

[20] To take another example, in the context of Pauline theology the forensic language of '*justification/acquittal*' assumes a cluster of ideas that would be without precedence in the use of this language in normal human experience: (1) the acquitted person is in fact guilty; (2) someone else provides the basis for the person's acquittal; (3) forgiveness of the wrong doing is foundational to acquittal; (4) the acquitted person is brought into an enduring relationship with the 'judge'. It would be a mistake to define the theological use of *acquittal language* on the basis of how this language works in human experience. The scriptural context for the language must guide how one understands its use when applied to God's acquittal of the believer.

[21] Jewett, *Election and Predestination*, p. 26, states that 'Election obviously implies rejection'. This assumption fails to take account of the full context of New Testament theology for understanding how the early church used election language.

response of the one selected or chosen. [22] However contextual evidence suggests that these concepts are not carried over into the theological use of New Testament election language with reference to believers. This should not surprise us given the analogical character of theological language drawn from human experience and, in this case, of the use of Scriptural language fashioned to describe corporate Israel and now re-applied to individual believers. We should be prepared to follow the evidence and explore other options for understanding New Testament election language which does not create contradictions within the text. [23]

Fifth, the word 'elect' is often used simply as a way of designating those who belong to God without saying anything about the 'mechanics' as to how they came to have this status. I Timothy 5:21 speaks of the 'elect angels' as a way of describing 'God's angels'. It is unlikely that there is an intended contrast between angels whom God selected to remain faithful to him and those that were not selected. It would also not make sense to apply the interpretation of election language as 'gracious initiative' to the expression the 'elect angels'. In Luke 18:7 Jesus says that 'God will answer the prayers of his elect', i.e. his people. [24]

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[22]   As has been pointed out, this is also true for the terms 'adoption' and 'heir'. In normal usage these are not conditioned upon the response of a person. However in its theological use these soteriological realities are, like election, conditional upon responding to and persevering in God's grace.

[23]   Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians* (BEC; Grand Rapids: Baker), p. 187, fails both to recognize any discontinuity when O.T. election language is applied to individual believers and to recognize that one cannot transfer all the meanings of a word from one context to its use in another. He does acknowledge that one of the intentions of election language is to affirm that the initiative in salvation lies entirely with God.

[24]   Other examples: Rom. 8:33: 'who will bring any charge against the elect of God'; Mk. 13:22: 'deceive the elect'; Mk. 13:27: 'gather his elect'; Matt. 22:14: 'many are called, few are elect'; Col. 3:12: 'clothe yourself as the elect of God'; Rom. 16:13: 'Greet Rufius, elect in the Lord'; 2 Tim. 2:10: 'I endure everything for the sake of the elect'; Titus 1:1: 'for the faith of God's elect'; Rev. 17:14: the elect come with Jesus. While in this usage the 'elect' is simply a way of identifying God's people, the term may well have been selected because of its associations with God's grace as the basis for their existence and the special status and loved character of believers. The other reason for the use of the term is that this was Scriptural language for believers. With respect to the phrase 'few are elect' in Matt. 22:14, R. T. France, *Matthew* (TNTC; Grand Rapids/Leicester: Eerdmans/InterVarsity Press, 1985), p. 314, notes that the term 'elect' is simply a designation for believers, '...the emphasis being on the fact of membership, not the means of achieving it.' For a contrary perspective

SURVEY OF NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS

The ultimate test of this hypothesis is whether the election texts of the New Testament can be naturally interpreted by focusing on the concept of *gracious initiative* without reference to the concept of the *selection* of some in contrast to others. It is not only possible to read the texts in this manner, it is also a natural interpretation which does not involve creating a contradiction with those New Testament texts affirming God's universal salvific will and the possibility of apostasy. This can be demonstrated in a review of the key election texts in Paul, Petrine literature, the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Matthew.

Pauline Texts. In Ephesians 1:4, 11, Paul states that believers are those whom God has resolved to elect and predestine to salvation on the basis of Christ's redemptive work ('in Christ'). The language is applied to those who have already responded to the Gospel and functions to emphasize the utter gratuity of God's grace.[25] These statements affirm that from the beginning God has always had loving and redemptive purposes towards those whom he creates. As God takes the initiative to draw people into relationship and when they respond to his call, this eternal purpose is actualized and they become one of the elect.[26] In this context Paul also affirms that God has acted in Christ to 'redeem', 'to forgive sins', 'to

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cf. Peterson and Williams, *Not an Arminian*, pp. 48-9; Jewett, *Election and Predestination*, pp. 24-5.

[25] Charles Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians* (Paideia; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), pp. 49-52; Romans (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2002), pp. 232-4, suggests that the language of election and predestation can be seen as primarily as a confessional affirmation that the initiative in salvation lies entirely with God. He points out that an emphasis on the divine initiative would have been especially important in a Gentile context where '...the pervasive principle of reciprocity would tend to subvert the Christian view of divine initiative' (*Ephesians*, p. 52).

[26] In several other Pauline texts election is traced back to a time before the world was created (2 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 1:2). This can be seen as a way of affirming that it had always been God's intention to act in this manner. God's decision to act in love was not an afterthought, not a 'Plan B or C'. It was 'plan A' in that it has always been his intention to act in love and grace towards those he brings into existence. It is likely that the prefix 'fore' in 'foreknowledge' is another way of grounding election in God's eternal purpose. There is a parallel to this idiom in Ephesians 2:10 where Paul says 'We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.' The point here is that it was always God's intention that those who embraced his redemptive work would 'do good works'. It is likely that Revelation 13:8 should be translated 'the Lamb that was slain from

reveal his will', to give 'the Spirit', to bring 'salvation', 'to make alive', to manifest 'love and mercy', and to hold out the promise of eschatological hope. These statements express the initiative of God to extend his grace on those who are in Christ. The language of election and predestination is in alignment with this purpose as it affirms that the initiative in salvation lies entirely with God.[27]

Romans 8:28 affirms that in the present circumstances of the believer, God is always at work to conform them to the image of Christ (=the good). This affirmation is grounded in the confidence that God has at every point taken the initiative to enable the believer's salvation. He has from eternity taken the initiative to draw them into relationship (=foreknew), he has determined the goal towards which they will move ('predestined to be conformed to the image of his son')[28], he has called and justified them and he will glorify them. These statements focus on the gracious initiative

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the creation of the world'. This would again be an idiom saying that Christ's redemptive work was always part of God's intention, i.e. it was 'plan A'.

[27] This emphasis on the initiative of God in salvation would have been especially important for Christians with a pagan background because in the various expressions of Graeco-Roman paganism the initiative in religious matters lay entirely with the person rather than the gods. In fact the Pauline emphasis on justification by faith without works may have been motivated more by the need to demolish the consistent and uncompromising legalism that characterized Gentile assumptions about how one related to the 'gods' than any expression of 'soft legalism' that may have characterized some Jewish thinking.

[28] To the modern ear the term 'predestination' has a strongly deterministic meaning. However the context of Pauline usage indicates that Paul himself does not use the word in a deterministic manner. In Romans 8:29 Paul says that God has predestined believers to eschatological conformity to the image of Christ. However as is argued elsewhere, the realization of this goal is conditional upon persevering in the faith (cf. the main text and note 28). In Ephesians 1:12 Paul says that God predestines believers to live to bring glory to God. In Ephesians 2:8 Paul says that God 'prepared in advance' (= predestined) the good works of Christians. The realization of these purposes is conditional in that believers must respond to this purpose of God and in their daily life bring glory to God and do good works. The fact that many believers do not bring glory to God or do good works is evidence that the language of predestination must be understood conditionally rather than deterministically. On Calvinist assumptions when believers fail to do good works or bring glory to God this would be because God ordained disobedience in those circumstances.

of God as the ground for confidence in his intentions for the believer in the present circumstances of life.[29]

Calvinist interpreters argue that Romans 8:29-30 is clear evidence for the absolutely unconditional character of election. Those whom God has selected for salvation will be effectually called and can be assured of persevering in grace until they reach the goal of eschatological glorification. This approach fails to take account both of the reason for Paul's one-sided emphasis on God's initiative and the broader context of Pauline theology. It would have been inappropriate to the point Paul is making to break up this powerful statement of God's work on behalf of the believer by introducing conditional clauses.[30] However the broader context of Pauline theology makes it clear that this is a one-sided statement which has a conditional component. Paul clearly believes that not all who are 'called' respond with faith and are 'justified' (e.g. Romans 10:8-15, 16-21). He also believes that eschatological glorification is conditioned upon persevering in the faith and that perseverance is not guaranteed for any believer.[31] Both the statement of the God's initiative and purpose as well as the condition of human response are stated together in Colossians 2:22-23: 'But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.'

Romans 11:5-7 is one election text which is often read as meaning that God selects some and hardens others: 'So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace. What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened.' This statement must be read within the context of Paul's entire argument

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[29] Craig Keener, *Romans* (NCCS; Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009), p. 110, argues that Paul '...apparently refers to God's choice mostly to emphasize the initiative of God's grace rather than human works (9:11).'

[30] E.g. by writing 'those who he called and who responded, he justified, those he justified and who persevered, he glorified.'

[31] Paul expresses himself in various ways which indicate he believed that apostasy or falling away is a real possibility: (1) statements which affirm that arriving at the goal of eschatological salvation is conditioned on 'remaining in the faith' (Col. 1:23; 1 Cor. 9:27 & 10:6-10; 15:1; Rom. 8:17); (2) warnings that severe ethical or doctrinal failure can result in eternal loss (Gal. 4:19; 6:8; 1 Cor. 3:17; 6:9f; Rom. 8:13; 11:22; Phil. 3:18f; cf. 1 Cor. 10:6-10); (3) statements assuming that falling away can nullify the benefits of conversion (Gal. 4:11; 5:4; 1 Thess. 3:5; 1 Cor. 15:1; 2 Cor. 6:1). Other relevant texts include 2 Cor. 13:5-7, 1 Tim. 1:19-20, 4:1, and 2 Tim. 4:3f; 10.

in Romans 9-11. Paul is responding to the twin objections that if the promises to Israel were indeed realized in Jesus then 1. God was under obligation to ensure that the covenant people recognized and responded to this reality and, 2. it would be wrong for God to allow Gentiles to be the primary beneficiaries of the promises to Israel.[32] In 9:6-23 Paul is arguing 1. that God has no obligation to turn up the heat of irresistible grace so that Israel will respond to what he does and as a result he is free to act in judgement towards Jews who spurn his grace; 2. that God is free to show mercy to responsive Gentiles, those who were not the primary recipients of Scriptural promises. In response to the Jewish demand for preferential treatment Paul wants to affirm God's freedom in the exercise of his mercy and judgement.

Romans 11:1-10 must be read within this context. Here Paul affirms that God has not rejected Israel. The evidence for this is that there are some Jews who have responded to the Gospel. However Paul wants to make it clear that the existence of Jewish believers is not due to any obligation on God's part to ensure that some Jews believe. Their status as believers is due entirely to the grace of God rather then to God's acting out of obligation to them. He expresses this in 11:6 by saying that their status is not based on 'works' (=God acting out of a sense of obligation) but on 'grace' (=the utter gratuity of God's initiative and call). In 11:7 he distinguishes between the 'elect', i.e. those who responded to God's gracious initiative, and the 'rest who were hardened', i.e. those who rejected God's gracious initiative and who God was free to harden rather than obliged to turn up the heat of irresistible grace until they believed. It is clear from 11:20-23 that these categories of 'the elect' and the 'the hardened' are not fixed. There is the possibility 1. for the 'elect' to 'be cut off' (=become one of the hardened); 2. for the 'hardened' to 'be grafted in' (=become one of the elect). Contextual indicators such as this in Romans 9-11 render implausible the reading of 9:6-23 and 11:1-10 as an expression of theological determinism.

Petrine Texts. Turning to the Petrine literature, in 1 Peter 1:1f the author addresses his audience as 'elect aliens of the diaspora'. He then says that this status is based on 'the foreknowledge of God the Father'. As is the case in Romans 8:29, the word 'foreknowledge' can be seen as describing the gracious initiative of God as the basis for their status as believers, i.e. the elect[33]. This fits a recurring theme in this letter that God's calling or

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32   Glen Shellrude, 'The Freedom of God in Mercy and Judgment: A Libertarian Reading of Romans 9:6-29', *Evangelical Quarterly* 81.4 (2009), 306-18.

33   Karen Jobes, *1 Peter* (BEC; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), pp. 68-9, interprets election language in 1 Peter 1:2 along the lines proposed here, i.e. as an affir-

initiative is foundational to the faith response of the believers to whom Peter writes (1 Pet. 1:3, 15, 23; 2:9f, 25; 3:9; 5:10).

2 Peter contains an explicit statement that God desires the salvation of all (3:9) and warnings against apostasy (3:17-21; 3:17). To these twin challenges to the Calvinist understanding of election can be added the author's use of election language in 2 Peter 2:10: 'make your calling and election sure'. The language is hardly consistent with an understanding of election as the unconditional and irrevocable selection of specific individuals for salvation. However the imperative makes sense if the author assumes that election is conditional in the sense that the believer can either forfeit or retain their elected status. This understanding of the statement is consistent with the interpretation of election language as a way of speaking of God's gracious initiative and the loved status of those who respond. The point would be that believers owe their status entirely to God's drawing (calling, election). But this is a status which can be lost, so believers are encouraged to persevere in God's grace and thereby ensure that they will experience the eschatological realization of their 'calling and election'.

Gospel of John. The Gospel of John makes frequent and powerful use of election language and concepts: 'All whom the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away' (6:37); 'No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them' (6:44); 'No one can come to me unless it has been granted him from the Father'(6.65); 'You did not choose me, but I chose you' (15:16); 'I have chosen you out of the world' (15:19); 'For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him' (17:2); 'I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me' (17:6).[34]

When Calvinist interpreters read these statements within the framework of a theological determinism where God scripts every detail of history in advance, they naturally find a theology of unconditional election.[35] However if Jesus and John shared these theological assumptions, it is hard to explain why the Gospel of John repeatedly affirms the universal scope of God's salvific will (John 1:7, 9, 29; 3:16; 4:42; 5:23; 12:32)

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mation of God's gracious initiative as the foundation for the believer's life and hope. The discussion of election language in this verse is not framed with reference to traditional Calvinist and Arminian categories. These issues are raised in the exegesis of 2:8 (pp. 155-6) where she appears to conclude with a non-Calvinist perspective.

[34] Cf. also John 1:13; 3:3, 7; 10:26-30; 17:9-10, 24.

[35] E.g. Robert W. Yarbrough, 'Divine Election in the Gospel of John', in *Still Sovereign*, pp. 47-62.

and warns about the danger of apostasy (John 15:2, 6). Furthermore the entire Gospel is written with a view to challenging everyone to respond in faith to Jesus. Why would John write *as though* it were possible for all to respond positively when *in reality* this was not the case? The assumption undergirding the language of John is that both Jesus' hearers and the readers of the Gospel possess the 'libertarian freedom' to respond with either faith or unbelief to Jesus. While God's antecedent grace is always the basis for a positive response, it is never said that this grace is 'irresistible'. Where people respond negatively, it is never said that this outcome was ordained by God and therefore there was insufficient grace to enable a response.[36]

Interpreting election language in John as expressing the idea that salvation is entirely due to God's gracious initiative and draws attention to the loved and special status of those who have responded to the Gospel works well for all these texts.[37] This approach also fits the emphasis in John on the importance of responding to Jesus with faith rather than unbelief. While God's grace enables a positive response, it is never said to be the sole cause. Furthermore where there is a negative response to Jesus, the focus is on the person's unbelief without any indication that God is the source of that unbelief.[38]

Gospel of Matthew. Matthew 22:14 is a particularly interesting election statement at the conclusion of the parable of the Wedding Feast: 'Many are called, few are elect/chosen" (22.14)'. Within the context of the parable the point is while all are invited to salvation, not all respond appropriately and are thus saved. It is generally recognized that 1. 'many' reflects Semitic

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[36] For an exceptional analysis of these issues cf. Grant Osborne, 'Soteriology in the Gospel of John,' in *The Grace of God*, pp. 243-60.

[37] Neither the traditional Arminian-Wesleyan view of election as based on a foreknowledge of who will believe or the purely corporate approach works well for the Gospel of John.

[38] Calvinists commonly juxtapose the concepts of divine sovereignty and human responsibility so as to affirm both that God ordains all human choices and that people are fully responsible for their decisions. A more relational construct which is truer to Scripture is to distinguish 'God's initiative' and the 'human response'. The New Testament assumes that where people respond positively to God, it is God's initiative which enables the positive response, though this grace is never understood as irresistible. However the Scriptures do not state that a negative response to God can be explained by a limitation in God's initiative towards those individuals, i.e. that there was insufficient grace to enable a positive response. The New Testament affirms that there are different responses to the same grace but does not try to explain the why and how of this phenomena.

usage and means 'all'; 2. 'few' means a smaller number than were invited; 3. 'elect' in this context simply points to the status of being a believer and does not mean that 'the few' have been 'unconditionally selected'.[39] The first clause affirms both the universal scope of God's redemptive purpose (all) and that God takes the initiative to draw everyone into relationship with himself (are called).[40] In the larger context of Jesus' message and the immediate context of the parable, the 'few who are God's People' are those who respond to God's call, to his gracious initiative, with faith and a life of discipleship. This statement again points to the conclusion that being one of the 'elect' is a possibility open to all. God invites all to relationship, but only the responsive can be described as 'the elect'.

CONCLUSION

Is election unconditional (Calvinism) or conditional (Arminianism)? The intent of election language in the New Testament is to focus on the absolute, unconditional grace of God as the basis for the existence of God's People. Thus the *intent* of election language is unconditional. However election language is only applied to believers, to those who have responded positively to God's gracious initiative. Thus from a different perspective one could argue that election language is conditional. One must say yes to God's election, to his gracious initiative, in order to become one of the

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[39] Cf. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 3 vols. (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark: 1997), 3, pp. 206-7, for an excellent discussion of the interpretive issues.

[40] Calvinists defuse the meaning of texts such as this by distinguishing between God's 'general call' and his 'effectual call'. The 'general call' is God's invitation to salvation to those who are utterly incapable of responding because God withholds the grace that would enable a response. Those selected for salvation, i.e. the elect, are 'effectually called'. For a full defense of this construct cf. Bruce Ware, 'Effectual Calling and Grace,' in *Still Sovereign*, pp. 203-27. On this view the assumptions underlying Matthew 22:14 are that 14a describes a 'general call' and 14b describes those who received an 'effectual call'. Moo, *Romans*, p. 530, n. 126, cites Matthew 22:14a as an example of a 'general call'. Jewett, *Election*, p. 99, points out with respect to Matthew 22:14 that '...Augustine argued that while God calls many through the proclamation of the gospel, only a few respond because only a few have been chosen in his secret will.' This interpretive distinction between a general and effectual call is based on the requirements of the Calvinist system. The New Testament assumes a single call with different responses. Those 'effectually called' are those who embrace God's initiative and the enabling grace inherent in the call. The New Testament distinguishes between two kinds of 'responses' to God's call, not two types of 'calls'.

elect. However the conditional side of election is not the focus of the New Testament.[41] The focus of election language is instead on the utter gratuity of God's initiative as the basis for the status of believers.[42]

Finally, since God calls and invites all to relationship with himself, the potential is there for 'all to be elect'. The New Testament never describes unbelievers as 'elect in principle' for the obvious reason that the language of election is part of the vocabulary used to describe believers. It is best to follow the lead of the New Testament and reserve election language for those who have responded to God's call. But as a means of reminding ourselves to think of election as an open, inclusive reality it is worth keeping in mind that from a theological perspective in principle 'all are elect' in that God invites all to embrace that status.

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[41] The statement in 2 Peter 1:10, 'make your calling and election sure', is the one statement which clearly brings out the conditional element of election language. Jesus' statement in Matthew 22:14 that 'all are called, few are elect' also implies the condition of human response. But the condition of human response is not found in most election texts. Once again the reason is that the language is being used of those who have already responded to God's grace.

[42] While the emphasis of election language in the New Testament is on the gracious initiative of God as the basis for the believer's status, one can also argue that the idea of choosing or 'selecting' is not completely absent. If God takes the initiative to draw people into relationship, then this implies that he has chosen to do so and can thus be said to have 'selected' those he invites to respond to the Gospel. The New Testament emphasis on God's universal salvific will means then that he has chosen or 'selected' all for salvation. However while election language assumes that God has made a choice, the focus remains on the expression of that choice in the gracious initiative which undergirds and enables every response to the Gospel.