

Pastor's Papers | Ronald H. Gann
Theology/Doctrine

Unconditional Election: Elect Individuals

Understanding Unconditional Election (Part 2)

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Jean Sibelius (1865-1957), the Finnish music composer, was no stranger to criticism. On more than one occasion, after being criticized by his detractors over the composition of his symphonies, he remarked, “Pay no attention to what critics say. No statue has ever been put up to a critic.” Whether or not Sibelius was right in his historical assessment we cannot be sure. But about one thing I am certain: When reflecting on my early days in ministry, to include my collegiate career and a brief stint as a pastoral intern, no monument was ever erected in my honor. I was a critic of the worst sort.

A critic, by and large, is a person who expresses a value judgment about someone or something, particularly when that someone or something is perceived as a disappointment. But criticism itself often reveals much more about the critic than the subject matter under scrutiny. And my knack for criticizing, while nothing short of shameful, revealed much about my spirituality.

Camouflaged as high-minded “discernment,” my judgmental attitude was an albatross of jealousy, envy, and insecurity rolled into one. Moreover, it was no respecter of persons. Its ugly reach extended beyond politicians, professionals, public personas, and pop-culture and included pastors in the pulpit. It was not uncommon for me to draw uninformed opinions about my fellow clergymen regardless of their reputations and in spite of their accomplishments. Whether it was their attire, oral presentation, command of Scripture, or differences in theology, many pastors often failed to meet my imposed standards. Judging a book by its cover, as it were, came natural to me. And nowhere was my unsettling attitude more apparent than when I spent an entire weekend under the training of Dr. Steve Viars. His life-story not only exposed my critical spirit for the sin that it was but it also illustrated the grace behind the Reformed doctrine of Unconditional Election. It was a tutorial in theology and humility that I will never forget.

Hosted by a church near my hometown, Dr. Viars was the keynote speaker at a weekend symposium on Nouthetic¹ counseling. No sooner had he walked into the auditorium were all eyes fastened on him. Dr. Viars greeted the seminar crowd with a polite nod and a megawatt smile that seem to light up the room. As a pastor, I admit that I was a little green with envy at how effortlessly he commanded the attention of the conference hall. Tall and handsome, well-dressed, nicely tanned, and obviously at ease before a slew of unfamiliar faces, he appeared to be everything one might admire in a megachurch senior pastor. Still jetlagged from his red-eye flight the night before, he managed to captivate the audience on sheer charisma alone.

In addition to his flawless gift for gab, Dr. Viars had an imposing intellect and an even more imposing résumé. He had achieved by the age of fifty what most pastors only dream of in a lifetime. An ordained minister since 1987, he was the senior pastor of one of the largest Reformed churches in Lafayette, Indiana. In addition to his pastoral work, he was an instructor of biblical counseling, a fellow at the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors and board president, an adjunct faculty member at Word of Life Bible Institute and Baptist Bible Seminary, an instructor and counselor at Faith Biblical Counseling Ministries, a published author, and a highly sought-after conference speaker. He was one of only a few dozen pastors nationwide whose counseling expertise was in high demand on the speaking circuit. Married for over twenty-five years and the father of three, Dr. Viars was the quintessential image of success.

I suppose it was Dr. Viars' many achievements and accolades, in comparison to a glaring lack of my own, which triggered my critical spirit. I was still honing my craft as a novice pastor, desperately trying to earn the respect of my peers in the ministry, whereas he had obviously mastered both. That he was well-liked and the toast of the town, in a manner of speaking, was a source of contention for my covetous ego. I wanted for myself what he had dutifully accomplished on his own through hard work, self-determination, and God's blessing.

My focus drifted away from the conference curriculum and onto Dr. Viars' many successes. Curiosity and daydreaming got the best of me. I couldn't help but wonder what sort of pampered life he and his wife enjoyed. The square footage of his house, including the luxury vehicle he probably drove, was enough to rapture my imagination. Owing to his immense popularity, I could only guess the number of Christmas cards the Viars' received each year. How many invitations to black-tie ministry functions landed in their mailbox? What exotic location did they call their summer home? Their spin through the lap of luxury must be staggering, I thought to myself.

My delirium didn't end there. Publishing houses, I assumed, were probably knocking down Dr. Viars' door, eager to offer him an advance for the rights to his next book. I imagined long lines of radio producers greeting him at every turn, soliciting his talent for their airwaves. There was little doubt in my mind that those he ministered to as senior pastor at his megachurch serenaded him endlessly with appreciation, if not adoration. Furthermore, when I stopped to consider the various men of notoriety with whom Dr. Viars probably rubbed elbows in ministry, my imagination ran wild with the names of celebrity preachers. Dr. Viars had it all, so it seemed. Popularity. Prestige. Praise. What more could a man want? In all likelihood a minister of his caliber and reputation probably gave little thought to amateurish pastors like me. Surely I was beneath his notice.

Never before had I been more wrong about a person. As the familiar lyrics go to an old song, "*Things aren't always as they seem; we see with our eyes but look behind the dream.*"² Regrettably, I had embellished this man and his character to such an unhealthy degree that I judged him to be something that he was not. My critical spirit was eventually arrested by the truth.

So what was it, specifically, that disarmed my guns of envy and changed my outlook about the man? As the conference wore on, Dr. Viars slowly but surely showed the audience his *true* character and allowed us access into his *real* life; the details of which were tear-jerking. Far from the enchanting fairytale I had concocted in my mind,

and nowhere near smug or sanctimonious, Dr. Viars lived a modest life of burden, *not* convenience. While he was certainly successful, some aspects of his life were far from desirable. In fact, one might say they were woefully tragic.

Dr. Viars dropped the bombshell on the conference crowd midway through the course study. Illustrating some point he was making, he mentioned rather unceremoniously that one of his children was mentally disabled. But more than just behavioral slowness, his son suffered from profound developmental delays, to include extreme physical disabilities that rendered him immobile, heightened dementia, a complete absence of mental acuteness, and dysfunctional motor skills. Diagnosed with severe mental and physical retardation, his son was given a life-sentence in a wheelchair with little to no way of communicating with those who loved him most.

Such a candid admission brought silence to the room. The Viars would never see their teenage son outgrow his diapers or liberated from the prison of his chair. In all likelihood he would never marry or have a family of his own. He would never possess the intellectual acuity to vocalize a sentence, much less utter the words that every parent longs to hear: “*I love you, mom and dad.*” Dressing, bathing, even eating—common tasks taken for granted in normal life—were uncommonly difficult in the Viars’ household. Their son could not be left alone in a room; he required unyielding care around the clock. Simple commutes to the local store or church on Sunday morning were anything but trouble-free; they were arduous and painstaking to facilitate. Costs for medications and treatments were never-ending. Hospital visits were routine. And the house was always in state of flux so as to make it handicap accessible and compliant. In short, Dr. Viars and his wife lived a life of burden.

Having a handicapped child is one of the most stressful experiences a family can endure. Dr. Viars and his wife knew this firsthand and in ways that I could not. The threat of communicable illnesses haunted their son and social awkwardness dogged their every step. Their son’s circumstances informed their every decision—what to eat, when to go out, and how to go about the most menial of errands. Their family life was an emotional roller coaster, seesawing back and forth between frequent hospitalizations and fending off one life-threatening crisis after another. Entertaining friends and family or hosting ministry functions at their home was simply a wishful figment of their imaginations.

Then there was the financial strain to consider. Providing for the necessary medical expenses, special equipment, special schools, and licensed care takers to assist his wife with their son while he was away handling ministry affairs or preparing his next sermon put an enormous amount of pressure on Dr. Viars. Indeed, the thought of retirement was unthinkable, much less affordable.

My heart went out to the Viars family. The hardship that was theirs, particularly for his wife who was the primary caregiver to their son, was unfathomable. But it quickly became evident that Dr. Viars was neither interested in my sympathy nor wanted my commiseration—or anyone else’s for that matter. The irony of his situation was not lost on me: What many of us saw as his beast of burden, he chose to see as a *blessing*. What he cherished most about his life, we in the conference crowd pitied.

But the biggest bombshell from Dr. Viars was yet to come. And it was a revelation that would forever change the way I viewed the man, to say nothing about my personal theology and how I viewed the Doctrines of Grace.

Some parents perceive their handicapped child as an extension of themselves and often feel shame, social rejection, ridicule, or embarrassment. Many cannot cope beyond the emotional disintegration that occurs within a healthy family when an unhealthy child enters their fold. The reactions of parents to the realization that their child is “abnormal” usually include shock, depression, guilt, anger, sadness, and anxiety. Given over to despair—that is, their profound grief over the death of a dream—they cry out to God, “*Why us? Why did You let this happen to us?*” But self-pity was imperceptible in Dr. Viars—in fact, only the opposite appeared true. The Viars’ response to their son’s fate was anything but common.

One can imagine the collective gasp that came over the conference hall when Dr. Viars revealed another secret to the audience. Their son—a sheltered young man with impaired cognitive functioning and neurodegenerative disease—was *not* born to them. He was *not* their natural child. Rather, the Viars had chosen to adopt him.

Adopted?

I could hardly believe my ears. My first thought, much to my embarrassment, was *Why?* Why did Dr. Viars and his wife choose to adopt a child that most rational minds, to include many well-informed case workers, consider un-adoptable? Moreover, what compelled an affluent couple like them, who had the world by the tail, so to speak, to disrupt their life of normalcy and ease by receiving into their family a person who only placed heavy demands on them? What was it about their son that was so worthwhile that it meant throwing their future into a wastebasket of uncertainty? Essentially, their decision to adopt a multi-impaired child meant that they were adopting a life of hardship, financial strain, and social discomfort. Why take on such an onerous task if they didn’t have to?

The answers to all of these questions are not terribly difficult to ascertain for a student of Scripture. In a word, it was *grace* that moved the Viars’ heart toward adoption. To some, the climax of adoption is the sweet smell of a newborn baby in their arms; to others, it is the rescue of a child from the foster-care system. Still for others, it is the long-awaited answer to infertility. To the Viars, however, adoption meant demonstrating the unconditional love of Jesus Christ. Where most people see only hardship and burden in connection to the handicapped, they saw an opportunity for love and mercy.

Fraught with disabilities, there was nothing inherently winsome about Dr. Viars’ son that made him more desirable than others like him. In fact, one could argue that, given the extent of his condition, he was the least likely candidate for adoption. Furthermore, Dr. Viars and his wife were all too aware that their son, through no choice of his own, was incapable of reciprocating the affection lathered upon him. Stunted in cognition, the closest he ever came to expressing any heartfelt feeling, apart from hunger pangs, was his excitement over oddities in nature, such as falling snowflakes. Intrinsically selfish and co-dependent, he had neither the motor faculties nor the mental awareness to express himself. He was an emotional and physical convalescent. He was powerless to fathom, much less appreciate, the lifetime of sacrifices that awaited his parents. But none of this mattered to Dr. Viars and his wife. They loved their adopted son unconditionally. And were it not for their unbending grace, he would have long ago been consigned to a state hospital, banished among a host of forgotten outcasts that society deemed convenient to throw away.

Dr. Viars' sacrificial love for his adopted son dropped my jaw. It sucker punched me, if you will. Indeed, my first impression of the man, which was stained by judgmental bias, exposed my foolishness. I had no choice but to repent of my critical spirit at once and seek God's forgiveness. If I were only half the man Dr. Viars was, I realized, I could count myself a spiritual success.

But more to the point, there was another important lesson gleaned from Dr. Viars' example. His decision to adopt a special-needs child is not unlike God's adoption of His elect children. With the same independence that Dr. Viars exercised his option to adopt, irrespective of anything meritorious in his son that influenced his decision, so God sovereignly did the same with His children. When sinners lacked any desire or acuity to know Him—that is, they had no mental, spiritual, emotional, or physical consciousness of God—He instead did the choosing on their behalf.

In John 6:44 Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." Our Lord's statement is a serious blow to man's autonomy. Apart from the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit, man is spiritually inept and impotent. He is darkened in his understanding (Eph. 4:18), dead in sin (Eph. 2:1-3), enslaved to sin (Rom. 6:17), and overcome by demonic influence (Eph. 2:2). Like a severely challenged person who is plagued with retardation, unregenerate man is incapable of understanding the things of God (1 Cor. 2:14). His wisdom is demonic and earthly (James 3:15). He cannot comprehend the words of Christ (John 8:43, 47). He is not able to subject his flesh to the Law of God (Rom. 8:7-8). Just as people cannot change the color of their skin, sinners cannot do the necessary good to please a holy God (Jer. 13:23). From the womb, every intention of man's heart is only evil continually (Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Psa. 51:5). In a word, man is spiritually *disabled* apart from the grace of God. Were God to have decided *not* to adopt sinners for salvation in eternity past—or had He acquiesced to our natural protests of rebellion—all mankind would remain confined to spiritual wheelchairs and lost in their sin.

Unconditional Election is a phrase that is used to summarize what the Bible teaches about the predestination—or the election—of specific people for salvation. It represents the second letter in the acronym T.U.L.I.P. Referred to by some theologians as "Adopted by God," Unconditional Election is not only the very heart of Calvinism, but it is the heart of salvation as a whole. It is a divine act of the sovereign, eternal, immutable, and omnipotent Creator who effectively determined in eternity past those whom He would lavish His grace upon and those He would leave in their sins.

Like the story of Dr. Viars and his son, Unconditional Election is a doctrine that tells the story of a gracious God who saw fit to shower His love upon those who, by all accounts, were un-adoptable. What is more, in contrast to most adoption stories we read today, Unconditional Election places a heavy emphasis not on the adoptee under grace but on the Adopter who gives it. What we believe about God's sovereignty, therefore, will directly affect our view of spiritual adoption, and ultimately how we view salvation.

Predestination & Election

Because of Adam's transgression in the Garden, all human beings enter the world as fallen sinners, "darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God" (Eph. 4:18). Conceived in spiritual rebellion, the unregenerate have no desire for fellowship with their Creator. They are born, in actual fact, blameworthy and at enmity with the One who created them. As noted already in our study, the effects of Total Depravity on the human condition are far-reaching and comprehensive. Mankind is inherently wicked, spiritually stillborn, enslaved to sin, blinded to God, captive to Satan, and incapable of responding to the things of God.

The disparity between God's holiness and man's ungodliness defies adequate description. The Lord is righteous, just, and perfect, whereas human beings are sinful, perverse, and corrupt. Owing to their spiritual bankruptcy, unregenerate men inevitably follow the god of this world, the devil, and live in subjugation to his rule. Consequently, the human race has cut itself off from the Lord of heaven and has forfeited all rights to His love and favor. With this gloomy reality in view, it would have been perfectly just for God to have left all men in their sin and misery and to have shown mercy to none. God was under no obligation whatsoever to offer salvation to anyone, much less to do so free-of-charge. Yet within this ominous context God revealed His graciousness by setting in motion His glorious plan of predestination and election.

The terms "predestination," "election," and "chosen" abound in Scripture and are inextricably linked with soteriology (the study of salvation). Because they are essentially three sides of the same coin (though theologians acknowledge slight variances between them) they are often used interchangeably in theological discourse. As a matter of record, *predestination* describes what God has decided in advance to accomplish. It implies that He has planned an outcome of events before the creation of the world, as indicated by the prefix *pre* before the word *destination* (cf. Acts 4:27-28; 15:8). Going beyond mere events, the words *chosen* and *election* are more pinpointed in meaning and refer to an act of choice whereby God chooses an individual or group according to His predetermined purpose. As it relates to the doctrine of salvation in Reformed Theology, to be chosen is also to be elect. To be elect is also to have been predestined. And to have been predestined is also to be among those chosen. These terms are fundamentally synonymous.

With the exception of perhaps Limited Atonement (see Section 4), no petal in the T.U.L.I.P. acrostic is more troublesome to the Arminian mind than Unconditional Election. The concept militates against our democratic sensibilities. To suggest—as Calvinism does—that our ancestral sin in Adam incapacitates our will and retards our ability to freely choose God—thereby requiring God to choose us instead—is the height of folly to many free-will evangelicals.

That the Bible teaches the concepts of predestination and election is nonnegotiable. Both Calvinists and Arminians agree on this fact (e.g. Matt. 22:14; 24:22; Luke 18:7; John 13:18; 15:16a; Eph. 1:4-5; 1 Pet. 1:1-2). Christians are described in the Bible as "those who have been chosen of God" (Col. 3:12 cf. 1 Pet. 1:1) and those whom "God from the beginning chose ... for salvation" (2 Thess. 2:13-14). In fact, the term *elect* is ascribed to *chosen believers* nearly a dozen times in the New Testament.

But mere agreement over the *fact* of election hardly settles the longstanding debate over its application. At issue is whether or not election is dependent upon man's foreseen response to the gospel or God's sovereign decree irrespective of man's actions.

In other words, the questions we are tasked with answering are: *Who* or *what* is elect and on what basis is God's divine choice made?

To these questions we are given two opposing answers. Arminianism views election as *conditional*. It is the *Church Militant*, as a universal body, that is elect, comprised of a people God predestined for blessing on account of their foreseen faith. One expert in Arminian theology writes, "Arminians believe that election is corporate, that God has chosen to have a people *and that predestination is God's foreknowledge of who will freely choose to be among God's people*" (emphasis added).³ Notice how this explanation emphasizes man's choice (as seen by God's foreknowledge) as the basis for predestination rather than God's sovereign decree. God, we are told, looked down the corridor of time to see who would willingly believe in Him and, on that basis alone, predestined them accordingly.

The Calvinist understanding of election, however, negates divine foresight and human will. It teaches that God, before the foundation of the world, chose certain individuals from among Adam's fallen race to be the objects of His underserved favor. These, and these only, He purposed to save. His eternal choice to save some individuals was not based on any foreseen act or response on the part of those elected, but was based solely on His own good pleasure and sovereign will. Thus, election was *not* determined by, or conditioned upon, anything that men would do in their lifetime but resulted entirely from God's self-determined purpose in eternity past. In a word, it was *unconditional*.

Herein lies the difference between the two camps. Dr. J.I. Packer explains, "The Arminians say: 'I owe my election to my faith,' The Calvinist says: 'I owe my faith to my election.'"⁴

The prominent evangelical view in the West, regrettably, sides mostly with the Arminian position. By way of analogy, American Christians tend to view the universal Church as a train on route to heaven. It is the locomotive (the Church) that is elect, but *not* necessarily the passengers on board. Individual sinners are said to have free-will whereby they can hop on or off the heaven-bound train at their discretion. Those who purchase a train ticket, as it were, have been predestined only because the Great Conductor saw in advance that they would do so willingly. God's foresight into man's actions—or lack thereof—is therefore the heart behind election in Arminian theology.

Calvinists couldn't disagree more. Continuing with our analogy, the Reformed view teaches that it is the passengers who are elect, not merely the proverbial train. And their election is *unconditional* because God's choice is not hinged upon whether or not the passengers willingly purchased a ticket beforehand but is independent of it. It is based on God's sovereign decree irrespective of constraints or influence from anyone or anything. Calvinists purport that God reserved and purchased an individual seat for each passenger on the train, not because He saw in advance that they would do so on their own accord or because there existed in them something meritorious. Rather, it was His good pleasure to give first class seating to certain people too destitute to afford a boarding pass.

Calvinism's take on election lands sideways for many American evangelicals. To suggest that God sovereignly chose in eternity past all those whom He was pleased to bring to a saving knowledge of Himself, thereby granting them eternal life, while abandoning others to their sin, invites fits of hysteria. It quite simply blindsides the

uninformed. Haunted by its shocking truth and staggered to learn of its abundant scriptural support, Unconditional Election elicits a kneejerk response from anti-Calvinists. They are quick to complain: “*How could God arbitrarily choose Tom and Debbie for salvation, absent of foreseen faith, but pass over Kenny and Sarah through no fault of their own?*” Told that God does so for His own good pleasure and in accordance with His will, they balk further: “*Such teaching makes God out to be unfair, capricious, and even a celestial chauvinist!*”

That the God of Reformed Theology challenges the flannel-board God and coloring-book Jesus taught in many Sunday schools today is apparent in the doctrine of Unconditional Election. The contempt people have for this doctrine is usually rooted in the fact that it leaves no room for man’s prized accomplishments, meritorious works, religious rituals, sacraments, presuppositions, or the exercise of his supposedly autonomous will. Moreover, the doctrine reveals a God who is not only infinitely gracious and sovereign but is also mysteriously selective. This radical truth is no small hit to sinful man’s pride or his fallen sense of equality and fairness. When litigated in the court of public opinion, it is hardly surprising that Unconditional Election engenders an allergic reaction from most.

Intoxicated by their belief in free-will, many Arminians have no choice but to philosophize, rather than exposit, their way out of the biblical texts stacked against them. Others sweep aside Unconditional Election with a nonchalant wave of the hand, apparently incapable of moving beyond their emotions and traditions. Still others treat the doctrine as invisible despite its ubiquitous presence throughout Scripture. When the subject is broached, they merely shrug their shoulders in apathy and change the topic of conversation. In many cases, at least so it seems, the doctrine seldom receives a fair hearing.

I remember one such occasion when I was driving with an Arminian friend on a lengthy road trip. It was not long into our journey before the conversation inevitably turned to Unconditional Election. I presented to him the biblical texts in support of the Calvinist position and the arguments behind them. I countered his Arminian responses concerning *conditional* election as articulately and as authoritatively as I could. When it was evident that he had exhausted all biblical ammunition at his disposal, but to no avail, I then asked him to give an account for the plethora of biblical texts which I had cited in support of Unconditional Election. To my reasonable arguments my friend, a longtime Christian, shrugged indifferently and said, “I just can’t believe God would choose certain people to be saved and not others. He loves everyone the same.” He then added, “*Even though the Bible appears to teach otherwise*, I choose to believe we have a choice in the matter. I just don’t think we can be sure.”

Regrettably, to my friend’s way of thinking, his personal feelings about how he thought God *should* behave trumped the Bible’s teaching on how God actually *does* behave. His presuppositions colored his theology. Not only had he mischaracterized the Calvinist position on personal choice, which Calvinists believe to be fundamental in salvation, but he deliberately turned a blind eye to the rational exposition of Scripture. He swapped hard truth for the comforts of a flannel-board God and a coloring-book Jesus who, equally and without prejudice, loves saint and sinner alike. For many evangelicals like him, who stubbornly refuse to allow God’s Word to speak in any other way than how they have been accustomed to understand it, Unconditional Election is an

affront to their senses. My friend's response only evidenced this. Arthur Wallis, in his book *The Chosen Fast*, observed:

When our minds are conditioned by prejudice or paralyzed by traditional views, we may face a truth in Scripture again and again without its ever touching us. Our spiritual inhibition concerning that truth permits us to see, but not to perceive. The truth lies dormant within, mentally apprehended but not spiritually applied ... The outcome of the struggle reveals whether or not we are open to receive and obey fresh light about God, and so grow in the knowledge of the truth ...⁵

Unlike my friend, believers of all stripes must be prepared to submit our ideas about divine election and man's supposed free-will to the acid test of God's Word. Suppositional theology, no matter how darling to our hearts, must be tested and tried by an authority greater than our personal preferences and whims (cf. Acts 17:11).

The testimony in Scripture concerning divine election is overwhelming. The New Testament tells us that the names of those in eternity past whom "God ... destined ... to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 5:9)—that is, the Elect—were "written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8 cf. 17:8). That is to say, "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world ... having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself ... being predestined ... according to the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:4, 11). Here the apostles John and Paul set forth the unmistakable teaching that, before the world was created, God preordained certain people "to obtain salvation" and for "adoption as sons," and recorded their names into the Lamb's divine ledger. In other words, the salvation of the Elect was decided upon and catalogued long before the creation account in Genesis 1:3-2:4! This truth is borne out in the clearest terms in 2 Timothy 1:9 where Paul writes that God "saved us and called us ... before the beginning of time" (cf. Tit. 1:2).

Neither John nor Paul was scandalized by God's sovereignty in election. In fact, writing with intent to destroy, both apostles took aim at so-called free-will election. John writes, "[We have] become children of God ... not of ... *human decision ... or will, but born of God*" (John 1:13, emphasis added). To John's words are added those of the apostle Paul in Romans 9:16: "[Salvation] does not, therefore, depend on *human desire or effort*, but on God's mercy" (emphasis added). Neither apostle could be clearer on the matter. To their way of thinking, a person's conversion to Christ falls squarely within the camp of God's predetermined will and providential mercy. To quote the apostles directly, "human decision," "human desire," and our "will" and "effort" are excluded from consideration. When all is said and done, "[God] saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy" (Tit. 3:5). In biblical theology, it is God's free and merciful will, not man's, which determines who is elect and who is not (Rom. 9:16).

And Paul and John are not alone. The Savior himself was unflinching when he taught that man does not choose God in salvation, but God chooses man. "No one," Jesus stated plainly, "can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father" (John 6:65, NASB). Elsewhere he declared, "no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son *chooses* to reveal him" (Matt. 11:27, emphasis added). This

latter statement clearly implies that God reveals Himself only to those He has chosen while the former teaches that man does not come to Christ at his own discretion, but only by God's will.

Unconditional Election is also seen in the election of the Twelve Disciples. "You did not choose me," Christ made clear to them, "but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last ... I have chosen you out of the world" (John 15:16, 19 cf. 6:70). This same calling in which the Twelve were chosen for ministry is the same calling by which all believers are chosen for salvation. "For we know, brothers loved by God," greeted Paul to the Thessalonians, "that he has chosen you" (1 Thess. 1:4). Elsewhere we learn that "many are invited [to the banquet of salvation], but few are chosen" (Matt. 22:14).

It is God who sovereignly chooses His elect. It is God who elects unconditionally His chosen. And it is God who calls to salvation those He has predestined. Unconditional Election is the decisional work of God for a select people too destitute to ever elect Him in return: "I was found by those who did not seek me," the Lord declared, "I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me" (Rom. 10:20, cf. Isa. 65:1). That God proactively supersedes in the eternal destinies of certain human beings for His own electing purposes is an indisputable fact.

Returning to predestination, Paul writes elsewhere, "And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified" (Rom. 8:30). Known as *The Golden Chain of Salvation*, or the *Ordo Salutis*, this passage lays the grid for election. Certain people are chosen for salvation in eternity past by the Father and, in time and space, called to faith in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Without fail, this calling ends with the justification and glorification of those chosen, predestined, and elected (cf. Php. 1:6).

Luke, the writer of Acts, brings Paul's statement on the *Ordo Salutis* and its connection to Unconditional Election to full circle in Acts 13. While Paul and Barnabas ministered in Pisidian Antioch on their first missionary journey, he writes, "and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed" (v. 48). Notice the tense and order of Luke's words. Luke unmistakably uses the passive voice ("were ordained") indicating that God had *first* chosen these specific people in Pisidian Antioch beforehand, and now through the conviction of His Spirit, brought them to faith in Christ according to election. The structure of his inspired words teaches unequivocally that those in Pisidian Antioch who believed Paul's message did so only because they had *first* been ordained in eternity past to believe. As Dr. James White notes: "This divine appointment [of believers in Pisidian Antioch to eternal life] obviously precedes and brings about the act of faith. God has appointed them to eternal life, and [for that reason] they believe."⁶

So why, we may ask, does God save people at all, much less predestine the conversions of unregenerate sinners before they are ever born? The answer is given to us, albeit somewhat ambiguously, in Romans 9:11. The Lord discriminatively preordains select people unto salvation, according to the apostle Paul, "in order that God's purpose in election might stand." And this He does, the apostle says elsewhere, "because of his own purpose and grace" (2 Tim. 1:9) and "in accordance with his pleasure and will" (Eph. 1:5). Whatever else Paul may have meant by these statements, it is clear that God had a premeditated purpose behind His actions; the rhyme and reason for which remain shrouded to us (cf. Deut. 29:29; Prov. 25:2). Notwithstanding this ambiguity, one thing

is certain: God could have chosen to save everyone (for He had the power and authority to do so) or He could have chosen to save none (for He was under no obligation to show mercy to any)—but He did neither. Instead, He chose to save *some* while leaving others to the consequences of their sin. By choosing to save some, when none warranted saving at all, God’s superlative grace is put on full display.

It is the overwhelming scriptural evidence for Unconditional Election which rescues many open-minded Christians from the despair of Arminian theology. The proof-texts are too many to evade. C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), for example, a beloved thinker in Christian literature and a supposed champion of classical Arminianism,⁷ had no choice but to surrender to the Reformed doctrine of Unconditional Election. Despite his own theological convictions to the contrary, Lewis conceded:

I was in fact offered what now appears a moment of wholly free choice. *But I feel my decision was not so important. I was the object rather than the subject in this affair. I was decided upon.* I was glad afterwards at the way it came out, but at the moment what I heard was God saying, ‘Put down your gun and we’ll talk’. ... It is a paradox ... I chose, *yet it really did not seem possible to do the opposite* (emphasis added).⁸

Lewis rightly captured the sentiment behind Unconditional Election (not to mention Irresistible Grace. God sovereignly decrees the salvation of those whom He elects; and those whom He elects He positively draws through the miracle of regeneration. In the words of Lewis, we have been “decided upon.”

—Ronald H. Gann

¹ Rooted in the sufficiency of Scripture, Nouthetic counseling is form of Christian counseling developed by Jay E. Adams, and published in his 1970 book, *Competent to Counsel*.

² Ron Block, *Doorway: “Things Aren’t Always as They Seem”*; Rounder Music, 2007

³ Alexander M. Jordan; as cited at jordansview.blogspot.com/2007/02/arminian-vs-reformed-theology.html

⁴ Eric Holmberg, *Amazing Grace: The History & Theology of Calvinism*; Study Guide and Workbook; (The Apologetics Group, 2009); p. 51

⁵ Arthur Wallis, *God’s Chosen Fast*; (Christian Literature Crusade, 1968); pp. 11-12

⁶ Dave Hunt & James White, *Debating Calvinism*; (Multnomah Publishers, 2004); p. 96

⁷ Lewis’ position on Calvinism and Arminianism is somewhat muddled. While some Reformed theologians, like J.I. Packer refer to Lewis as a Calvinist, others insist that the Christian thinker was a proponent of Classical Arminianism.

⁸ Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity*; (Baker Books; 2008); p. 98