

IS CORPORATE ELECTION MERELY VIRTUAL ELECTION? A CASE STUDY IN CONTEXTUALIZATION.

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In their various treatments of the issue of election, so-called “Calvinists” frequently dismiss any meaningful concept of corporate election. Though many, including Calvin himself, may well admit that the church is Christ’s elect body, Calvin and his namesakes quickly add that such a notion is meaningless unless the particular members of that body are specifically chosen to be included within its ranks. For example, in the words of C. S. Storms,

Divine election may be defined as that loving and merciful decision by God the Father to bestow eternal life upon some, but not all, hell-deserving sinners. . . . One does not enter the ranks of the elect by meeting a condition, be it faith or repentance. One enters the ranks of the elect by virtue of God’s free and altogether gracious choice, as a result of which he enables us to repent and believe.²

In the view of many interpreters like Storms, we cannot speak of the issue of election in any meaningful way without positing, fundamentally, that God chose specific individuals for salvation. The choice might grow out of God’s inscrutable will and purposes to set his choice of specific individuals (for Calvinists), or it may be based on his foreknowledge of who will exercise faith (for classical Arminians), but many scholars insist that God chooses *individuals* for salvation, and the church is only the elect body because it is comprised of elect individuals. I wish to challenge that notion and hypothesize that we can indeed speak of God’s choice of the

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²C. S. Storms, *Chosen For Life. An Introductory Guide to the Doctrine of Divine*

church in Christ without also implying that God specifically chose the individuals who will comprise that church.

One way to get at this is to respond to a specific scholar who has written specifically to this issue. In the March 1993 issue of *JETS* Thomas Schreiner conducted a study of Romans 9 to determine whether Paul there teaches that God has selected specific individuals for eternal salvation.³ He responds to what he believes to be the two most common objections to the Calvinist position on Romans 9: (1) that Romans 9 speaks of nations not individuals, and (2) that Romans 9 treats the salvation of corporate entities, not individuals. I propose to respond to his attempts to salvage the Calvinist understanding in Romans 9, and in the process show, I hope, that the election of the *corporate* body of Christ is not a meaningless abstraction or, in more contemporary terms, not merely virtual election.

First, many biblical interpreters assert, along with scholars like Schreiner and others, that the evidence of Rom 9:15 shows that Paul's concern is with the salvation of individuals. There Paul says, as you will recall, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (NRSV). Granted—God demonstrates mercy or hardens whom he will, individuals or groups. The quibble here is not whether God deals with individuals—nor the salvation of individuals—but the *basis* on which he responds to individuals, and the basis upon which he confers

Election (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 30-31.

³"Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election unto Salvation? Some Exegetical and Theological Reflections." *JETS* 36/1 (1993) 25-40. Reprinted with some minor revisions in T. R. Schreiner and B. A. Ware, ed. *The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), I: 89-106 and reprinted yet again in idem. *Still Sovereign. Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000). Page numbers in parentheses in the text below will refer to the original *JETS* article.

salvation to them.⁴ As the entire section of Rom 9:30 - 10:21 makes clear, Paul's concern is with Israel's lack of faith—shall we say, with *individual* Jews' lack of faith. The criterion God applies to individual people is this: believe in the resurrected Christ as Lord and you will be saved; pursue or insist on righteousness by any other means, and you will fail to attain salvation (10:9; 9:30-32). The issue for individuals is the presence or absence of faith, not whether they were individually chosen by God for salvation.

Calvinists typically argue, second, that the presence of a remnant involves the selecting out of individuals from a larger corporate group. Again, granted; but the issues remain the same: what criterion determines whether one is a member of the remnant or not? According to Paul, the bulk of Jews were not among the remnant due to their unbelief, not because God never elected them to salvation. In Rom 11:20 Paul says, “. . . They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith . . .” Then in 11:23 Paul adds, “And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in . . .” So, the issue is not whether one can refer to a group called the “remnant” as chosen; the issue concerns what accounts for their chosenness.

Perhaps a reminder of one of Jesus' major parables is in order here, for it concerns the inclusion and exclusion of people from the kingdom of heaven. The parable of the wedding banquet recorded in Matt 22:1-14 clarifies, I think, the central issue. The king in the story did not predetermine who would finally sit in the hall to enjoy the feast. To be included in the

⁴I believe that Schreiner wrongly thinks that defenders of so-called corporate election deny that in this section, Romans 9-11, Paul is unconcerned with the salvation of individuals. That is simply, and obviously, not the case. We believe that Paul *is* concerned with the salvation of individuals, but also that he uses principles of God's selection of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Pharaoh—and the nations which they represent—to underscore that God chooses, and that God has the right to choose as he pleases. But this is different than saying that the passage defends the view that God chooses specific individuals for salvation.

banquet required responding to the king's invitation on his terms. "For many are called but few are chosen" (22:14). As to the meaning of the parable, it is clear that the Jews rejected God's invitation to them and were disqualified—in the parable the king "destroyed those murderers, and burned their city" (22:7). Meanwhile, "outsiders" were gathered to join the festivities. Jesus defines the elect as those who respond to God's invitation to believe in Jesus.

Third, in his essays Schreiner misconstrues my (and others') position when he says that we are inconsistent in 9:30 - 10:21, for there we appeal to individuals' decisions—indeed, as I did above. Though I do not claim to be able to avoid inconsistency, I do not doubt that Paul speaks of individuals in this section. I certainly agree with Schreiner that Paul's discussion revolves around both the nation and corporate entities on the one hand, and individuals' membership in those corporate groups on the other. The nation Israel was corporately elect, but individual Jews may or may not have been part of the remnant. Now with the advent of Jesus, Jews must believe in him to be saved. Paul makes clear, "For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel" (9:6; NRSV). In this era the church assumes the category of "my people" formerly applied to Israel (9:25-26; cf. 1 Pet 2:9-10), but individuals become members of that people only through their faith in Jesus Christ. Paul makes no mention of election to account for why individuals populate the new chosen people.

In other words, I am not saying that the stress on corporate entities in 9:1-29 rules out all references to individuals within those entities. My point is simply this: when Paul says God chose Isaac (an individual) and his descendants (corporate) or Jacob and his descendants, Paul clarifies the formation of the *nation* of Israel, not how individual Israelites obtained eternal salvation. The issue of Pharaoh's (an individual) hardening concerns his role in the drama of nations, not his personal salvation. As I argue in my book, *The New Chosen People*. A

Corporate View of Election,⁵ biblical authors cite many instances of God’s choice of individuals—that is, people selected for ministries and functions, as the examples of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Pharaoh show in Rom 9.⁶ However, when Paul comes to discuss how God dispenses salvation to individuals (or members of corporate groups), he singles out *faith* as the key to obtaining it.

Fourth, and here we get to the central issue in our study, Schreiner sees a logical flaw in any attempt to base salvation on people’s faith without God’s predestination of that faith (as in the Calvinists’ view). He thinks that for God to elect an entire group, such as the church, logically entails that the faith of every member of the saved group must also be God’s gift given before time began, and this is his wording (page 36). Only a Calvinist, or one who thinks like one at this point, would feel the force of this objection, for it assumes a determinist view of reality. That is, according to this kind of thinking, if God elects a group—the church—then since the members of that group are elect before the foundation of the world (in God’s foreknowledge), God must predetermine that each member of that group should come to faith. Thus, to Schreiner’s point of view, corporate election implies that “individual faith is *not* decisive for salvation” (page 36; my emphasis).

Let me repeat that: Schreiner believes that anyone who asserts that God has elected a corporate group such as the church must also assert that the faith of the individual person who comes to Christ is *not* decisive for their salvation. Of course, this contravenes many explicit texts in the New Testament. Does Schreiner really believe anyone holds to a view that denies

⁵W. W. Klein, *The New Chosen People. A Corporate View of Election* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001).

⁶On God’s choice of individuals in the Old Testament, see G. Quell and G. Shrenk, “ἐκλέγομαι,” *TDNT* 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967): 152-59.

this most fundamental datum? We all agree that individual faith *is* decisive. So, what's the answer?

Well, if one does not subscribe to such a determinist view, this objection falls flat. Again, in many locations the Bible clearly stipulates that faith *is* decisive for salvation. In Jesus' and Paul's presentations of the gospel to their hearers, the individuals' need to trust in Christ is precisely what is decisive for their salvation and the lack of which precisely excludes them from eternal life (e.g., John 3:16-21; Acts 2:37-42; 13:38f.; Rom 10:9-13 to name a few). Despite the claims of some writers, I believe that the New Testament writers do not say that God determines that certain individuals will be saved and that others will be damned.

Assuming a traditional view of God's foreknowledge,⁷ it seems logical to me to say that an all-knowing God would know ahead of time who will be saved (this is purely a matter of prescience, of what God knows about the future)—and call that group his “chosen ones”—and yet require that each individual's personal trust in Christ settle whether or not he or she will be a part of that body. Simply because the omniscient God knows who will be in the group does not logically require that God control each individual's personal decision to embrace or reject Christ, that is, to enter that group. In one instance it is a matter of what *God knows*; in the other it is a matter of what each *individual does* with the claims of Christ. For that matter, God also knows which individuals will reject Christ. Does God determine their rejection and consequent

⁷Of course, some scholars hold various views of God's foreknowledge that are not traditional. For example, some contend that God does not know the future actions of creatures who have free will, since there is nothing to be known until those actions occur. See, e.g., R. Rice, “Divine Foreknowledge and Free-Will Theism,” in C. H. Pinnock, ed., *The Grace of God. The Will of Man* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) 121-139, the various essays in C. H. Pinnock, ed. *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), J. Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), and G. A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000). Though they raise fascinating and important issues, at this point we cannot pursue these departures from our

damnation? A consistent determinist would have to affirm so, and this is precisely the conclusion of J. Piper in his book, *The Justification of God*.⁸ But I do not agree that for God to chose the corporate church in Christ entails his selecting each individual to be in that body. Ephesians 1:4 affirms precisely the church's election in Christ without any hint of God's choice of individuals to populate that body.⁹

Many Calvinists believe that in the end corporate election turns out to be the election of a mere abstract entity, what we might call merely virtual election, and therefore something to be rejected as illogical on one hand, and unbiblical on the other. Schreiner uses an analogy of the formation of a brand new professional baseball team to show how absurd he finds the construct of a corporate election. But in fact, his analogy demonstrates the inadequacy of his argument. He alleges, "It makes no sense to say, 'I am going to buy a professional baseball team' that has no members, no players, and then permit whoever desires to come to play on the team" (page 37). In such a scenario, Schreiner believes, "You have chosen that there be a team, the makeup of which is totally out of your control." Finally, he says, "The point of the analogy is that if there really is such a thing as the choosing of a specific group, then individual election is entailed in corporate election" (page 37).

main objectives.

⁸J. Piper, *The Justification of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983).

⁹In his comments on this section K. Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), observes ". . . election is primarily a corporate term. Nothing in Ephesians 1 focuses on individuals; rather, the text focuses collectively on those who are in Christ. This changes the theology. People become elect only in the Elect One—Christ. . . . Individuals are not elected and then put in Christ. They are in Christ and therefore elect" (49). E. Best, *Ephesians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998) comes to a compatible conclusion: "Election and predestination in our passages are not related primarily to individual salvation but to God's purpose" (119). For an opposing view, see P. T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester, England: Apollos, 1999), who observes, "It is inappropriate, however, to suggest that election in Christ is primarily corporate rather than

Recent developments in Colorado argue otherwise. The year 1993 marked the first year for a new baseball team, the *Colorado Rockies*. Several years prior to that, an ownership group made a presentation to baseball's National League to solicit a franchise for Colorado and the Rocky Mountain region. The proposal was accepted by the league. At that point Colorado had a baseball team, but also at that point it had no players, no members, not even a manager! But the *team* had been selected; it even had a name. But contrary to Schreiner's reckoning, it simply was *not* true that the makeup of the new team was totally out of the control of the ownership group. Also contrary to Schreiner's presumption, the new owners did *not* simply invite whoever wanted to play baseball to join the new squad. But it was true—just as it is with all other teams—that membership on the *Rockies* technically was open to all qualified players. The new managerial staff screened, drafted, and purchased the rights to players, but the management and the players had to negotiate terms of the contracts until a full complement of team members eventually emerged.

So it *is* possible to buy (shall we say, choose) a team that has no members. It happened! Subsequently, players were solicited, and those who met the requisite criteria for inclusion and who agreed to the terms of the team, became part of it. Yet we proud Coloradans claimed the *Rockies* as “our team” even before any players were chosen; in fact they purchased an unprecedented number of season tickets in anticipation of the team's first season. In using this illustration Schreiner is simply wrong to insist that corporate election entails individual election (page 37). It was possible to choose that there be a team before it contained any members. Admittedly, this happens rarely in baseball, and more rarely in *Heilsgeschichte*, but it can happen. It is not illogical to allow that possibility.

personal and individual” (99).

Now, of course, I may have shown only that Schreiner's analogy was poorly chosen, perhaps a straw man that he chose because he thought it would make his point. But in fact I believe the failure of the analogy is more serious for the entire Calvinist allegation that corporate election is the choice of an abstract entity. For in the minds of many Calvinists, the objection to corporate election hinges precisely on whether one can envision an elect group apart from having the individual members of the group also specifically chosen to be in the group. As is typical of defenders of individual election, Schreiner condemns the corporate election concept by viewing it as an abstract entity or empty class. By giving it such a pejorative label, he believes he can dismiss it.

I, for one, never argue that God chose an abstract entity, any more than when God selected Israel to be his chosen people, Israel was a mere abstract entity. Israel as a nation was chosen, and every individual Israelite was an elect person. When God spoke those fateful words to Abram in Genesis 12:1-3, he was selecting a nation—in him. Correspondingly, the Church is God's new chosen people,¹⁰ and every individual Christian is an elect person—in him, i.e., in Christ. That explains why numerous New Testament texts affirm that Christians are elect (e.g., Rom 8:33; Eph 1:4; 2 Thess 2:13). The key question remains, however: how does one become a part of the chosen people? Concerning Israel, being born of Jewish parents established one as part of the chosen people. In the Christian era being born *again* (or born of the Spirit) adds a person to the church, the elect body of Christ. To be born again requires faith. To trust in Christ puts one into the corporate Christ, his elect body.

Drawing this to a conclusion, let me focus what I see as Paul's reasoning in the latter part of Romans 10. Paul, quoting Isaiah who is *speaking for God*, laments the failure of Israelites to

¹⁰Hence the title of my book, *The New Chosen People*.

believe in spite of the clear preaching of the message (10:16-21). Why does God appear to express frustration over the Jews' failure to accept the message if he very well knows that he did not elect them to salvation? Rather he calls them a "disobedient and obstinate people" (10:21; NIV). By the way, this resembles Jesus' lament over Jerusalem when he says, "How often I have longed to gather your children as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but *you were not willing*" (Matt 23:37; NIV, emphasis added).

Schreiner believes I am imposing "western logic" here in raising this objection. But that facile dismissal of the sense of the text works only if an interpreter starts by assuming a Calvinist viewpoint. I contend that a face-value reading of the text leads me to conclude that God has not predetermined which individuals will be saved. God may, in fact, want everyone to be saved, as several N.T. texts clearly imply (e.g., 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9; Jn 3:16), and the logic of this could well affirm that the application of salvation then depends upon each individual's decision to believe or reject God's provision. The ultimate explanation why not all are saved may then lie in their failure to believe, not in God's mysterious decision not to elect those he loves and desires to be saved.

But in a fashion typical of certain interpreters, Schreiner would rather retreat to the convenient haven of "mystery." He turns this into a virtue: the appeal to mystery shows that Calvinists are not dominated by western logic (page 39)! But could it be that they are so dominated by their system that when faced by insurmountable obstacles they can only appeal to mystery? Even Schreiner admits that the explanation provided by a view of corporate election eliminates the need to postulate mystery here.

Each interpreter must decide where the balance of evidence lies. My concern is that not enough space is given to alternatives to Calvinism. Perhaps it is because they are not as adequate

in explaining the data as are Calvinist explanations. If so, they should be deservedly dismissed with all speed. Or perhaps alternatives to Calvinism have not been adequately presented, defended, or given an honest hearing. This short rebuttal is one meager attempt to give one alternative a bit more defense.¹¹ But there may be a different issue to raise. How do we contextualize such a discussion? I remember a Denver Seminary chapel speaker here a decade or so ago—Samuel Escobar, a Latin American scholar who was currently teaching in North America. He told us that in his speaking both north and south of the border with Mexico, he would often ask people in his audiences to interpret Jesus’ familiar expression, “The poor you always have with you” (John 12:8). The typical North American interpretation was something like, “No matter what efforts are expended to help the poor, there will always be poor people.” Then he recited the explanation of a Mexican woman in a out-of-the-way barrio. She interpreted Jesus’ words to mean, “There will always be rich people to exploit us.” The two answers say something very different about the contexts of the interpreters.

What difference does it make what view one takes in the debate over individual versus corporate election? And what does one’s conclusion say about the interpreter? Why are interpreters so passionately convinced they are right, even when they come to seemingly opposite conclusions? No doubt we all struggle with understanding many mysteries in the Bible. But we must ask: are some texts mysterious because they appeal to categories or embrace a system of logic that is foreign to or beyond us, or are they puzzling because we are trying to make them fit our own preconceived constraints?¹² We may be at an impasse here. I wonder

¹¹For another collection of defenses of viewpoints similar to the one presented here (and in my book) see the various articles in C. H. Pinnock, ed., *The Grace of God. The Will of Man* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989).

¹²In his book *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), D. A. Carson

whether the issue hinges on some sort of western versus eastern logic, that one side is more in touch with the true perspective of the texts while the other side's thinking is clouded. Or is this really a matter of one's of prior commitments?¹³ The prior commitments of so-called Calvinists or Arminians (or whatever label we choose) may exert far more force that we admit and strongly determine their exegetical outcomes. That is the reason we must seriously examine our preunderstandings, and honestly question how often we make texts mean what we want them to mean.¹⁴ As real estate agents remind us, "Location, location, location," we interpreters must grasp the implications of, "Context, context, context"—not merely the ancient context of the text, but ours as well.

clarifies four senses in what people mean when they use the term 'logic' (pp. 87f.). I agree with him that we need to avoid contravening 'logic' in the sense of agreed-upon universals, "the fundamental 'laws' of logic, such as the law of noncontradiction and the law of the excluded middle . . ." (89). Given this understanding, then, the question should not be one of western versus eastern ways of thought when we speak of 'logic.' What does it mean for someone to affirm both that God wants all people to be saved and that God selects only some for salvation? Does this contravene 'logic' in Carson's sense above (i.e., it goes against the law of noncontradiction)? It seems to me it does, and no amount of pleading for mystery or a nonwestern type of logic will erase the illogicality. For his part on the issues of divine sovereignty and free will, Carson believes we must accept the biblical tension that the biblical writers themselves either never sensed or attempted to resolve. See D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility. Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981).

¹³I have had several opportunities to teach in Ukraine students from many former Soviet countries. It always startles me how "arminian" they are; how they intuitively question Calvinist thinking. Without presuming to know all the issues, I wonder whether their experiences of persecution—and their witness of former church members who abandoned the faith—lead them to conclude that people can "lose" salvation. Of course, one can't base theology on experience, but their experiences may affect how they understand certain texts. Are scholars no less affected?

¹⁴For additional perspective on issues concerning interpreters' preunderstandings see W. Klein, C. L. Blomberg, and R. L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 98-116; 138-51.