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Divine Election: A Representation of Different Views

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Introduction

This essay does not intend to present new insights into the doctrine of election. Nor does it seek to assess constructive approaches to the doctrine in contemporary theology. Instead, we will survey the historical approaches to the question, focusing on classical Protestant thought from the Reformation to early twentieth-century dogmatic expressions, and show how different theological systems and hermeneutical approaches entail the distinct resolutions to the intellectual questions the doctrine of election raises. In other words, each theological tradition, earnestly seeking faithfulness to biblical texts, develops internally consistent doctrines of election that, nevertheless, result in teachings that significantly differ from those of rival traditions. We place the emphasis, therefore, on the different *views* of election, for each viewpoint approaches the relevant biblical texts with different questions in mind. By keeping the hermeneutical and dogmatic history in mind, theologians will be better equipped to readdress the doctrine of election in light of recent research in biblical—especially Pauline—studies.

Locating Election within Dogmatics

Scholars have long attended to the placement of election within dogmatic systems, though they differ as to the importance of the arrangement of theological *topoi*. Lutheran dogmatician, Francis Pieper (1852-1931), for example, carefully places his discussion of election after the doctrine of the church, and just before his treatment

of eschatology. As we will argue, this placement is important, though Pieper plays down the significance of this move, stating:

We place the doctrine of election after the doctrine of the Church because Scripture addresses those who by faith have become members of the Christian Church as the elect (Eph. 1:3ff; 2 Thess. 2:13-14, etc.) We prefer this position for the further reason that Scripture assigns to the doctrine of election not a principal, but an auxiliary role. It serves to corroborate the *sola gratia* In passing, we note that the arrangement of doctrines in dogmatics is immaterial as long as they are taken from Holy Writ ¹

We can excuse Pieper for failing to recognize the importance contemporary philosophers place on the relationship between medium and message or the interrelation between biblical data and hermeneutical coherence within a theological paradigm.² The arrangement, however, is by no means “immaterial”; it is the heart of the matter. Intuitively, Pieper realizes this, despite his reluctance to highlight the implications of his arrangement, when he makes “Election in its Proper Setting” the second sub-section of his chapter on election.³ He recalls that election filled Martin Luther (1483-1546) with dread when he treated it within the context of the doctrine of God. Pieper says that God did not “blindly reach into the mass of mankind with His almighty hand and with His bare omnipotence seize a number of men as His elect” but instead insists that election remain connected to the doctrine of Christ and the church’s enjoyment of the means of grace so that “we are happy to find that all our distress has vanished.”⁴

If indeed the placement of the doctrine of election in a twentieth-century dogmatics text is significant, it is helpful to consider its placement in the history of Protestant dogmatics. Within the

¹ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1953), 473.

² For the importance of networks of belief, see Jeffrey Mallinson, “Epistemology of the Cross: A Lutheran Response to Philosophical Theisms,” in Corey Maas & Adam Francisco, and Steven Mueller eds., *Theologia et Apologia* (Wipf & Stock, 2007).

³ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3, 475-8.

⁴ Pieper, vol. 3, 476.

Reformed tradition, John Calvin (1509-64), Wolfgang Musculus (1497-1563), and Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499-1562) consider the doctrine of election closely related to Christology.⁵ For this cluster of thinkers, the work of Christ is the *causa electionis*, connected to divine love, and deeply Trinitarian.⁶ Calvin, far from placing the doctrine of election front and center in his *Institutes*, discusses the doctrine within his larger discussion of the Christian Life (Book III). As Protestant orthodoxy developed its own scholastic methods, especially in the Reformed tradition, it began to include the doctrine of election within the larger framework of the doctrine of God. For example, Girolamo Zanchi (1516-90) connects foreknowledge and predestination, and discusses these concepts as a subsection within theology proper, following directly from his treatment of the “essential properties” of God.⁷ As we shall see, seemingly insignificant changes to the placement and context of the doctrine of election bear upon its pastoral application and overall meaning.

Choose Your Own Theological Adventure

At the risk of both offending monergists by using the term “choose” and also of seeming too playful, it is helpful to understand the different views on election as a series of dogmatic choices. This “choice” is really about interpretive *options* and the theological trajectory that each option generates. Those unclear about the terms involved in the chart that follows can read on to better understand them, consulting the more detailed studies mentioned in the footnotes if necessary. Note that the either/or format of the chart does not

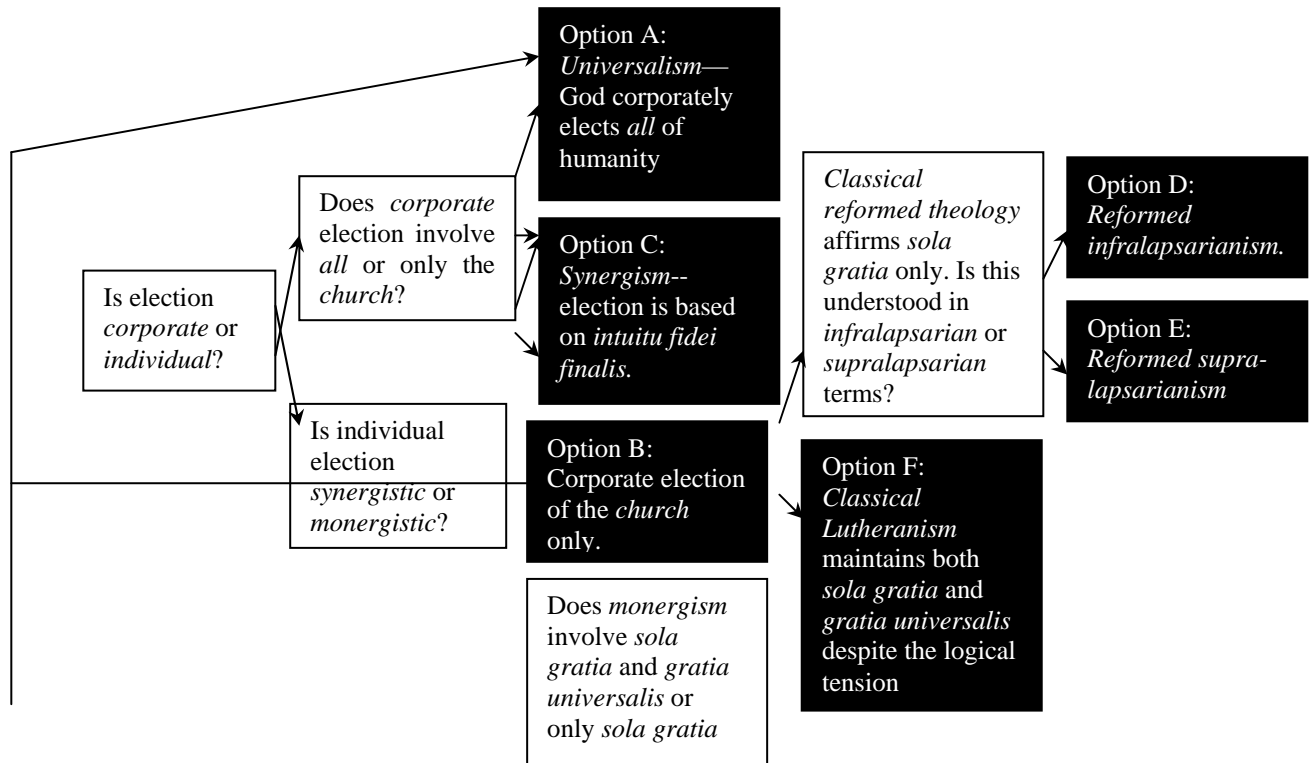
⁵ The most helpful discussion of this within the Reformed tradition is Richard Muller’s *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988).

⁶ For information on how this plays out in the later Reformed orthodox, see Heinrich Heppel, *Reformed Dogmatics Set Out and Illustrated*, Ernst Bizer ed., G.T. Thomson trans. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), 171.

⁷ Girolamo Zanchi, *De religione Christiana fides—Confession of Christian Religion*, Luca Baschera and Christian Moser eds. *Studies in the History of Christian Thought* 135. Vol. 1 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 130-138. Note, however, that Zanchi also emphatically connects election to Christ: “... praedestinationem sanctorum gratuitam esse, quia in Christo facta est et propter Christum executioni mandatur ...” (138).

suggest that theological options are straightforward. Rather, it maps the basic historical menu. Diversity and nuance at each point along the way should surprise no one.

FIG. 1.1: VIEWS ON ELECTION



Is election individual or corporate?

Many who investigate the doctrine of election assume that the doctrine relates primarily to the question of why one individual responds favorably to gospel proclamation, and why that individual's neighbor does not. This orientation is predictable, since the dominant conversations about election, from the time of Augustine down to the codification of Protestant orthodoxy, centered on individual election. Context matters here: for much of this period, the context was examination of the divine nature and will. For instance, Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), treats predestination front and center in Part I of his *Summa Theologica*. Moreover, he does this under the heading of "the one God," prior even to his discussion of the Trinity. While the context of the doctrine of God does not necessitate an individualistic

approach to election, it removes it as far as could be from the doctrine of the church. That is, to the extent that systematic theologies mirror the flow of the Apostle's Creed (which most do), the doctrine of God is first, the doctrine of the church is penultimate: coming just before the discussion of eschatology. Theologians like Aquinas and Zanchi who treat election toward the front of their work thus make little or no reference to the church—the corporate body of Christ—as the elect people of God.

If, however, election is treated outside the discussion of God and the divine decrees—such as in connection to the doctrine of Christ or the doctrine of the church—the ecclesial and corporate aspect emerges. Of course, many theologians have advocated individual election with a Christological or ecclesial flavor, but the *view* of the doctrine apart from consideration of the divine will makes corporate election a compelling option. Though most of this essay will dwell on the distant theological past, corporate election is best understood as a contemporary emphasis that draws from early Christianity. For example, Karl Barth advocates a corporate election connected to Christology, calling Christ the electing God and the elected human.⁸ Those united to Christ are the elect; God predestines the church through a positive, free and gracious call.

More recent defenses of corporate election draw from new research into Pauline theology. Brian Abasciano presents an evangelical defense of corporate election, arguing as follows:

1. The concept of election in the Hebrew Bible is corporate, as even those who affirm individual election admit.
2. Paul's discussion of election is corporate, viewing the elect as the church that is chosen in Christ.

⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II, 2: *The Doctrine of God*, Part II, trans. G. W. Bromiley, et al. (Edinburgh, 1957), 3. Note that while this discussion takes place within the doctrine of God, it is explicitly connected to the idea that God's self-revelation here centers on Christ.

3. The New Testament was written in the context of Hellenism and Judaism, both of which gave priority to collectivist, rather than individualistic, perspectives.⁹

Accordingly, corporate election radically shifts the discussion away from philosophical theology—and speculation—to reinvestigation of biblical theological investigation into the nuanced understandings of the chosen people of Israel the church as the elect eschatological kingdom.¹⁰ Those who affirm corporate election therefore moves away from debates about the fine points of the order of the decrees, so important to most of the debates within historical theology.

Is election synergistic or monergistic?

Popular talk of “Calvinism v. Arminianism” as the classic theological polarity does injustice to centuries of nuanced and philosophically sophisticated medieval debate. It might be more accurate to speak of a debate between the double-predestinarian (and advocate of a form of limited atonement) Gottschalk of Orbais (800-869) and the bishop Hincmar of Reims (806-882).¹¹ The Gottschalk-Hincmar debate is not as well known as the Calvinist-Arminian debate, primarily because Gottschalk’s theology resulted in

⁹ See Brian Abasciano, “Corporate Election in Romans 9: A Reply to Thomas Schreiner,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49.2 (June 2006: 351-71). Abasciano’s extended discussion is found in his book: *Paul’s Use of the Old Testament in Romans 9:1-9: An Intertextual and Theological Exegesis* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2006).

¹⁰ For a discussion on the history of understanding these concepts, especially in the interpretation of Pauline literature, see Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

¹¹ See Wilhelm Grundlach, ed. “Zwei Schriften Hinkmars von Reims,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, 10 (1889), 258-309; D. E. Nineham, “Gottschalk of Orbais: Reactionary or Precursor to the Reformation?” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 40 (1989), 1-18; and the general treatment of the debate in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine: Vol. 3: The Growth of Medieval Theology (600-1300)* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1978), 81-96. This medieval debate is one of the few aspects of the current essay that could use significantly more research, especially in the English-speaking world.

condemnation, the destruction of much of his work, and his imprisonment. Thus, there was lively debate about predestination centuries before the Reformation. Of course, Gottschalk's problems began with his attention (whether accurate or not) to the debate between Augustine and Pelagius, and it is this early polarity that provides the dominant historical framework. However, given the long and winding path of the conversation throughout the centuries, it is best to speak in terms of the doctrinal resemblances between Augustine/Gottschalk/Calvin on the one hand and Pelagius/Hincmar/Arminius on the other;¹² that is, between monergism and synergism (see option C below).

Monergism is the belief that God is solely responsible for a person's salvation, whereas synergism refers to the belief that God and human beings cooperate in the process of an individual's redemption. Those who believe in synergism, such as classic Wesleyans and some pietistic Lutherans, consider election conditional, whereas monergists affirm an unconditional election. This means that monergistic conceptions of election insist that there is absolutely nothing within the elect that renders them any more deserving of God's grace than the reprobate.

Does monergism involve sola gratia and gratia universalis or only sola gratia?

Monergists divide into three basic camps: (1) those who assert that justification takes place by grace alone (*sola gratia*) but deny the extension of saving grace to all (*gratia universalis*), specifically the Reformed theologians, (2) those who affirm *sola gratia* and *gratia universalis* to the extent that all are individually redeemed, resulting in a form of universalism, and (3) those who hold *sola gratia* and *gratia universalis* in tension, such as classical Lutheranism teaches.

Option A: Universalism

For our purposes, let us call universalism any Christian theology that contends that all humans will, ultimately, be reconciled to God. Universalism entails a kind of election in that includes the idea that God elects and calls all humanity out of death through the redemptive

¹² This grouping does not mean to equate Pelagius' theology with that of Hincmar and Arminius.

work of Christ.¹³ Given the many nuanced approaches of how this might work, and the history and arguments for universalism, a full discussion of the concept requires a separate essay entirely. All we can address here is the place of universalism within the larger conversation about election. There are two basic paths to such belief (as our diagram shows). The first path is through the idea that Pauline teaching indicates that election expands in scope from Abraham’s family, to Israel, to the Church, to the whole world.¹⁴ The second path is through the implications of holding *sola gratia* and *gratia universalis* simultaneously. Whereas many Lutherans have held these two concepts in tension without resolving the tension through universalism, harmonizing the two concepts in some Reformed circles can launch a trajectory toward universalism. For example, the school of Saumur, France, following Moses Amyraut (1596-1664) held to hypothetical redemptionism (colloquially known as “four-point Calvinism”). Amyraut’s opponents, over the centuries, have charged that this compromise position is unstable, and logically leads to universalism, though Amyraut himself did not advocate universalism, but instead opted for *hypothetical universalism*.¹⁵ The connection

¹³ Note that a similar concept of “catholic redemption” scattered throughout the writing of Robert Farrar Capon differs in that, while all are perpetually extended the promises of redemption, salvation is perpetually resistible. Capon appropriately avoids the term “universalism,” since in his approach God refuses access to salvation to none, but individuals are not compelled to accept their call out of their self-imposed hell: “‘Hell is only for those who insist on finding their life outside of Jesus’ death.” [*Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 232]. Thus, there are many theological approaches that include a pious hope for all but do not technically count as universalistic.

¹⁴ The direct, biblically-centered approach is found in the pseudonymous author Gregory MacDonald’s *The Evangelical Universalist* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006). See also the relevant chapters by and concerning Thomas Talbot in Chad Owen Brand, ed., *Perspectives on Election* (Broadman and Holman, 2006). For the most recent monograph on universalism within historical theology, see Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal Salvation: eschatology in the thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁵ See Moses Amyraut, *Traité de la predestination et de ses principales dependences* (1634). Despite the frequent allegation that Amyraldianism leads to universalism [for instance, B. B. Warfield *The Plan of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: *Footnote continued on next page ...*)

here between Amyraldianism and universalism is that if Christ died for all (through an unlimited atonement), the other “four points of Calvinism” indicate that God’s grace is unconditional and irresistible, and thus ultimately effective for the universal population to which the atonement applies.

Option B: Corporate election

Whatever the character of a particular expression of corporate election, it is unlikely to contain the concept of double predestination. That is, it rejects the idea that God predestined not only to redemption, but also to eternal damnation. The perspective of corporate election draws its strength from the context of biblical discussions of election rather than the detailed analysis of individual scriptural proof texts. That is, it is a doctrine, which views election as an ecclesial concept: God calls the church, which is the communion of saints united to Christ by faith. Once one starts from this perspective, discussion of the order of the divine decrees gives way to discussion about the nature of what constitutes a true church.¹⁶ Corporate election is a superb illustration of how one’s *view* or contextual perspective on election affects the ultimate articulation of the doctrine.

Option C: Synergism

Synonyms for “synergism” include “semi-pelagianism” (usually a derogatory term, since orthodox Christianity condemned pelagianism as a heresy), “Arminianism,” and “Wesleyanism.” The Western medieval version of synergism is most pronounced in the late medieval school known as the *via moderna*, whose slogan was “*Facienti quod in se est, Deus non denegat gratiam*” or “for those who do their best, God will not deny grace.”¹⁷ Synergism derives from a foundational perspective that gives priority to human choice

Eerdmans, 1973), 98] and others, we are unaware of any extended study of the historical connection between the two theological positions.

¹⁶ While corporate election, in the contemporary conversation, usually refers to the work of Karl Barth (as seen above), an American evangelical expression can be found in William Klein’s *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001).

¹⁷ See the discussion in Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, (3rd ed., Cambridge, 2005), 107-8.

and volition over human volition in the formation of belief. From this perspective, discussion of election is of minor or secondary concern, since it becomes little more than an academic discussion about what it means for God to choose those who choose to believe in Christ. Election is understood, therefore, as God's choice *intuitu fidei finalis* (that is, in God's view of ultimate faith); God chooses those who will ultimately choose God. Grace is still at work, since grace is necessary for regeneration, but it is neither unconditional (*sola gratia*) nor irresistible.

Option D: Reformed infralapsarianism

The debate between infra- and supralapsarianism relates to the point at which, in the order of God's decrees, the decree to elect to eternal salvation occurs. Note the present tense: the debate is not about whether God chose to predestine some to life and others to damnation before or after the actual fall of humanity within time and space. Rather, it is about whether God's primary purpose (the cosmic *telos*) was to end with a group of redeemed and reprobate (supralapsarianism) or whether God chose to redeem the elect to salvation given the foreseen fall of humanity in their original freedom (infralapsarianism). Infralapsarians believe that God, aware that humans would freely fall, decreed to elect some of the future fallen individuals to eternal salvation.

The language here involves a spatial metaphor of above (*supra*) and below (*infra*) due in part to the infamous Table of Predestination developed by Theodore Beza.¹⁸ Reading from top to bottom, Beza's Table represents the *ordo salutis* and visually depicts the decree to save and damn select humans before (above in his chart) the decree that humans would bring about a free, spontaneous, and contingent fall. Beza ought not be accused of a radical departure from the theology of John Calvin.¹⁹ However, once again, one finds that the

¹⁸ Theodore Beza's "Table of Predestination" is found in the work entitled *Summa Totius Christianismus*, included in the collected works: *Tractionum Theologicarum, in quibus pleraque Christianae Religionis dogmata adversus haereses nostris temporibus renovates solide ex Verbo Dei defenduntur* (Geneva, 1570-82). An English translation is found in Heppie, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 147-8.

¹⁹ Mallinson argues for basic continuity, despite significant shifts in emphasis, in *Faith, Reason, and Revelation in Theodore Beza (1519-1605)* (Oxford, 2003). For an important evaluation of the older assertion that there is a deep discontinuity [Footnote continued on next page ...]

medium becomes the message. Despite the deeply biblical concern of Beza's teaching on election, and despite the fact that Beza treated the doctrine in a variety of contexts, especially his exegetical work on Paul's Epistle to the Romans,²⁰ his memorable visual depiction of the decrees may have been too pedagogically effective, from the perspective of infralapsarianism.

Infralapsarians tends to shy away from philosophical determinism and tendencies to excessively speculate about the hidden will of God. They hold that God's saving work is an act of grace, which saves the elect *out of* the mass of reprobate sinners, and justly damns the rest according to their spontaneous (non-coerced) sin. Thus, as one author of popular-level Calvinism explains, election to life is "unconditional" while "condemnation is conditional."²¹ Old Princeton theologian Charles Hodge articulates infralapsarian theology by stating that God first decided to create the world and declare the divine glory, secondly to allow the fall, thirdly to call out the elect to life, and fourthly to punish the wicked.²² Infralapsarianism thus tends to emphasize the flow of actual history, rather than what occurred in the mind of God before all time.

Calvin himself disparaged curious speculation about God's order of operations in his *Institutes*:

Human curiosity renders the discussion of predestination, already somewhat difficult in itself, very confusing and even dangerous Since we see so many on all sides rushing into this audacity and impudence, among them certain men not

between the sixteenth and seventeenth century Reformed thinkers, see Richard Muller, "Calvin and the 'Calvinists': Assessing Continuities and Discontinuities Between the Reformation and Orthodoxy," *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995): 345-75. Muller demonstrates how biblical humanism and the tools of scholasticism were not mutually exclusive, and cites Melancthon's *Loci Communes* as an example of the possible interrelationship between the two approaches (361).

²⁰ *Jesu Christi Domini Nostri Novum Testamentum, Sive Novum Foedus, Cujus Graeco contextui respondet interpretationes duae: una, vetus; altera, Theodoi Bezae. Eiusdem theod. Bezae Annotationes ...* (Cambridge, 1652).

²¹ Edwin H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 104-5.

²² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (New York: Schribner, 1873), 319.

otherwise bad, they should in due season be reminded of the measure of their duty in this regard. When they inquire into predestination they are penetrating the sacred precincts of divine wisdom which god would have us revere but not understand And let us not be ashamed of ignorance in this matter, wherein there is a certain learned ignorance For there is good reason for us to be deterred from this insolence which can plunge us into ruin.²³

Though it is unclear which approach Calvin would have taken had he carried on the discussion in the context of Protestant scholasticism, such language certainly fits with an infralapsarian ethos.

The near testimony of the Reformed confessions is on the side of infralapsarianism. The Formula Consensus Helvetica goes so far as to repudiate supralapsarianism, and even the famous Synod of Dordt, while tolerating both views, leans toward infralapsarianism, which was the majority opinion at the Synod. The Belgic Confession expresses infralapsarian theology well:

We believe that all the posterity of Adam, being thus fallen into perdition and ruin by the sin of our first parents, God then did manifest himself such as he is ... he delivers and preserves from this perdition all whom he, in his eternal and unchangeable council, of mere goodness hath elected in Christ Jesus our Lord, without any respect to their works: [God is] just in leaving others in the fall and perdition wherein they have involved themselves.²⁴

Despite the resonance with biblical texts, infralapsarianism gives way to supralapsarianism for those who are interested in drawing out the logical implications of Scripture.

Option E: Reformed supralapsarianism

²³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.xxi.1-2. For a discussion of how Calvin and his successors applied election to pastoral contexts, see Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation*, American University Studies, Series VII, Theology and Religion, Vol. 89 (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).

²⁴ Article XVI of The Belgic Confession, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983).

Also called *antelapsarianism*, supralapsarianism starts from a consideration of God’s initial purpose to demonstrate ultimate justice, by damning the reprobate, and ultimate mercy, by unconditionally electing those predestined to redemption. There is no denying that Reformed supralapsarianism’s strength is its logical coherence. In this scheme, the decrees of God work backward from ends to means. God first purposes to demonstrate the divine character by graciously rescuing some and justly condemning others, secondly decides to create a mass of humanity with which to work, thirdly permits a fall, and finally divides the eternal sheep from the eternal goats. Both infralapsarians and supralapsarians emphasize that the fall is a part of the decree, but insist that it is part of the permissive decree—an inevitable but spontaneous event.²⁵ Here, the conceptual framework is informed less by explicit biblical statements than by Aristotelian understanding of causality. For Aristotle, a “final cause” is the end or *telos*: the last thing to happen is the first thing intended.²⁶ For a contemporary example, when a pool player rejoices when the eight ball falls into a corner pocket; the cue ball hits the eight ball at the precise angle and velocity; the cue ball moves because the player thrusts the cue stick in a particular way to make the cue ball move in the desired direction; all parts of this sequence serve to bring about the final result, and the player wins. Likewise, all the divine decrees serve to bring about whatever scripture declares is God’s end result.

Supralapsarianism thus takes logic, or formal reason, seriously. Theodore Beza, a representative of embryonic supralapsarianism, illustrates this point well. Those casually familiar with Beza’s work often overlook the fact that Beza considered himself primarily a biblical scholar. Much of his work on election flows from his extended excursions on the subject that occur within his commentary on Romans 9.²⁷ Thus, it is unfair to argue, as Walter Kickel seems to do, that Beza has a “secret sovereign place” for material reason in

²⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 119.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Parts of Animals, Movement of Animals, Progression of Animals*, A. L. Peck and E. S. Forster trans., Loeb Classical Library 323 (Loeb, 1968).

²⁷ See Theodore Beza, *Cours sur les Épîtres aux Romains et aux Hébreux 1564-66*, *Travaux d’Humanisme et Renaissance* 226, eds. P. Fraenkel and L. Perrotet (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1988).

addition to formal reason into his theological system.²⁸ However, Beza was an ardent defender of Aristotelian logic, arguing at one point that his Reformed academy would not stray from Aristotle in the slightest (*ab Aristotelis sententiam ne tantillum quidem deflectere*).²⁹ The data of faith remained located in the biblical text, but Beza represents one of many subsequent Reformed orthodox scholars who found it appropriate to tease out the logical implications of the biblical text. Concerning the doctrine of election, this meant that though supralapsarian doctrine is not explicit in Scripture, the logical implications of Scripture lead conclusively to the idea that the final cause (God's ultimate predestination of the elect and the reprobate) informs the whole sequence of redemptive history. Once again, we find that the perspective from which a theologian asks questions of the texts has a profound effect upon the conclusions one draws from the texts concerning election. Though the dogmatic discussion of election concerns the mind of God, even supralapsarians applied their doctrine, in pastoral contexts, to the troubled consciences of the Church of God. Thus, while Lutheran Jakob Andreae (1528-90) saw the Reformed doctrine of election as the weak point in its pastoral theology, Theodore Beza "claimed that baptism was not the *locus* of assurance for doubting Christians [as it was for the Lutherans]. Certainty of salvation was located in the gracious activity of God for his children. Pastor Beza grounded assurance in the character and power of God."³⁰

Option F: Classical Lutheranism

We will discuss the classical Lutheran approach finally not to give it the last word, nor because it resolves problems unsolved in the perspectives addressed to this point, but because it is the authors' tradition, and because it is perhaps the hardest to understand, even by

²⁸ This is the thesis of Walter Kickel, *Vernunft und Offenbarung bei Theodor Beza: zum Problem des Verhältnisses von Theologie, Philosophie und Staat*, Beiträge zur Geschichte und Lehre der Reformierten Kirche 25 (Neukirchen, 1967). For a discussion of this, see, Mallinson, *Faith, Reason and Revelation*, 79.

²⁹ Theodore Beza, *Correspondance de Théodore de Bèze*, ed. Hippolyte Aubert, Henri Meylan, Alain Dufour et al., vol 11, (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1960-) 295.

³⁰ Shawn Wright, *Our Sovereign Refuge: The Pastoral Theology of Theodore Beza*, Studies in Christian History and Thought (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), 187-88.

those within the Lutheranism. The Lutheran approach to election often leaves non-Lutherans and Lutheran laity perplexed for four basic reasons. First, it appears incoherent. Lutheran dogmaticians and clergy cannot seem to close the logical loop by harmonizing the resistibility of God’s gracious call through the means word and sacraments. God predestines to eternal salvation, but the condemnation of individuals remains wholly the responsibility of the unbeliever. Second, Lutheran churches, schools, and even universities, often left the doctrine untaught or explained through the centuries. Third, Luther’s emphasis on the *theologia crucis* focuses theological attention on the scandal of the cross rather than the decrees.³¹ Lutherans have been reluctant to dwell too long on the hidden will of the God (*deus absconditus*). Fourth, it is difficult to pinpoint the “classical” Lutheran approach because it is located in a sort of inter-tidal zone (represented, for example, by the Formula of Concord) between Luther’s approach within his work in the *Bondage of the Will*, which is distinctly Augustinian, and the *intuitu fidei finalis* of later Lutheranism.

Lutherans distinguish between foreknowledge (*praescientia*) and predestination (*praedestinatio*). The first, *praescientia* involves no more than God exercising omniscience. God knows all things and therefore has full foreknowledge of eventual belief or unbelief. As the Formula of Concord states:

This foreknowledge extends alike over the godly and the wicked, but it is not the cause of evil, neither of sin, namely, of doing what is wrong (which originally arises from the devil and the wicked, perverse will of man), nor of their ruin [that men perish], for which they themselves are responsible [which they must ascribe to themselves]; but it only regulates it, and fixes a limit to it [how far it should progress and] how long it should last, and all this to the end that it should serve His elect for their salvation, notwithstanding that it is evil in itself.³²

³¹ For introduction to the theology of the cross, see Walther von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, trans. Herbert Bou-man (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976) and Alister McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).

³² Formula of Concord, Epitome, XI 4:3.

The second *praedestinatio* acknowledges that God is omnipotent and exercises that power to save the lost sinner. God’s eternal election or predestination extends only to the saved. God sets individual grace to the sinner in motion before the foundation of the world. As the Formula continues: “The predestination or eternal election of God, however, extends only over the godly, beloved children of God, being a cause of their salvation, which He also provides, as well as disposes what belongs thereto. Upon this [predestination of God] our salvation is founded so firmly that the gates of hell cannot overcome it.”³³

Here, Lutherans view predestination in light of the saving work of Christ, rather than in terms of God flexing almighty sovereign arms to enact a capricious choice. Election is an extension of the Lutheran teaching on justification. God saves the church by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone; ultimately, God alone deserves the glory for final redemption. Lutherans acknowledge the paradox here. God desires all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (drawing from 1 Tim. 2:4 and Titus 2:11),³⁴ though some resist God’s gracious call to all, of their own accord. Nonetheless, those who possess saving faith find themselves in that state because God made the saving move (Eph. 1:3-6). Lutherans accept these two seemingly contradictory biblical concepts, but recognize that the relation between the two is a mystery. This sidesteps the common duality found in most debates about this topic. Arminians reject approaches to election that deny human cooperation in salvation. The Reformed harmonize seemingly contradictory statements by believing that if God is all-powerful, there must be an election to salvation as well as to damnation. Both the Arminians and Reformed approaches consult the tools of logic to interpret the ostensibly incompatible

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Note, however, that while Luther affirmed a distinction between the universal saving will and particular saving will of God, his translation of 1 Tim. 2:4 suggests that God wills that all people should be “helped” rather than saved. For a detailed discussion of this, see Lowell Green, “Luther’s Understanding of the Freedom of God and the Salvation of Man: His Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:4,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 87 (1996): 57-73.

texts.³⁵

Our definition of the classical Lutheran approach to election is one that holds *gratia universalis* and *sola gratia* in tension. This is not to deny the rapid drift from this paradox toward the synergism of post-Reformation Lutheranism, described by Green:

God's eternal decree of election no longer determined who would be saved or lost. The efficacy of that decree was made dependent on the faith of the individual; God willed everyone to be saved, but God's will and call were not effectual unless followed by the decision of those who came to believe. Faith as God's gift was changed into faith as a human virtue which caused the difference between salvation and damnation. Faith became a human faculty and a means of manipulating God, and theology became anthropocentric, a "theology of glory".³⁶

Luther himself indicated that such a drift was predictable: sinful human nature tends to cling to the law. The law, as understood by Luther, connects righteousness to human action. It seems easy for Christians to accept an entirely gracious saving will of God enacted long ago. However, from the perspective of an individual's spiritual autobiography, it is easy to link salvation to some human quality or disposition. If God decided to grant saving faith to the church before the foundation of the universe, individuals have little trouble affirming this cognitively. Human passivity, however, though integral to Lutheran soteriology, is hard to maintain as a central concept in regular ecclesial conversation. That is precisely why the doctrine is avoided in many local congregations, and why the doctrine could be reengaged in Lutheran congregations with fertile results.

Conclusion

This essay was intended as a survey of various, primarily Protestant, perspectives on the doctrine of election. Though a casual observer might assume that the array of options represents random and self-contained options on a handful of biblical texts, closer

³⁵ For the intellectualism of the Arminian position, see Richard Muller, "*Fides and Cognition in Relation to the Problem of Intellect and Will in the Theology of John Calvin*, *Calvin Theological Journal* 25 (1989), 263-77.

³⁶ Lowell Green, "Luther's Understanding of the Freedom of God," 73.

inspection reveals that each option relates to the broader theological perspective of an interpreter, the unique questions brought to the text, and the role of formal reason in the service of exegesis. Universalists approach election in light of the trajectory of expanding, concentric circles of God's choice of and for humanity. Advocates of corporate election view election in light of the question of the church's identity. Synergism considers election in light of the presupposition that salvation is the result of a human decision. Infralapsarianism views election from the starting point of the spontaneous human fall. Supralapsarianism views election in light of Aristotle's emphasis on final causality. Lutherans, informed by the paradox of the cross, allow a tension between seemingly incompatible biblical texts concerning election to remain as they stand. Each tradition asks questions of the text with dramatically different dogmatic topics echoing in their minds. It is no wonder, then, that their dogmatic assertions are diverse. This is not to assert that each interpretation has equal exegetical or dogmatic merit, but rather to recognize the hermeneutical consistency within each exegetical and dogmatic tradition.

Though our intent in this essay was merely to map the options that church history carries forward, rather than to provide a comprehensive defense or critique of the individual options, we nevertheless encourage those who wish to move forward with a practical application of the doctrine of election to consider operating *from the perspective of the church*. This perspective allows readers of Romans 9-11 to shift delicate consciences from worry about God's freedom to hate the reprobate toward reflection upon God's freedom to choose those previously considered outsiders. The church's proclamation to those beyond the walls of the church can echo Christ's promise to of rest for the weary and heavy laden (Matt. 11:28); its homilies to believers within the church can include a reminder of the humility (John 15:15) and comfort (Rom. 8:38-39) based on the gracious election of God in Christ. Such an ecclesial perspective on election has the advantage of drawing from recent research into pre-Christian Judaism and the Pauline corpus, and has a rich history in both the Lutheran and Reformed traditions.

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