

Critique of  
 BRUCE A. WARE, “DIVINE ELECTION TO SALVATION: UNCONDITIONAL,  
 INDIVIDUAL, AND INFRALAPSARIAN”  
 by Jack Cottrell

In many ways Ware’s essay is exactly what I expected, i.e., heavy emphasis on biblical exegesis with a typical Calvinist “spin.” My critique will thus begin by examining the key texts used by Ware to undergird his view. We will see that they are not as straightforwardly Calvinist as they have been made to appear.

Since the “infra vs. supra” issue is indeed an “intramural debate among Calvinists,” and since Ware and I agree that predestination to salvation is individual and not just corporate, I am directing my attention to the texts cited as proof of *unconditional* election.

The first passage is John 17. Ware emphasizes Jesus’ references to *those whom the Father has given him* (vv. 2, 6, 9, 24), who are taken to be all those who are unconditionally elected to salvation, those to whom the Son “may give eternal life” (v. 2). They are taken to be not just the apostles but all believers, based on v. 20. Ware asserts that “*each and every one of those given to the Son is saved*” (pp. 6, 30m).

In reply, first of all, I believe it is clear that Jesus’ references to “those whom the Father has given him” apply to the twelve apostles, not to the totality of saved individuals. Verse 20 clearly makes this distinction. Also, verse 20 does not imply that all believers are the subject of the entire high-priestly prayer in John 17; its inclusiveness clearly applies only to the prayer in vv. 17-19, and perhaps v. 21.

Second, even if John 17 does refer to *unconditional* election, it is election to *apostolic service*, not to salvation. This applies also to John 15:16, “You did not choose Me but I chose you.” God unconditionally gave the twelve to Jesus as apostles, and Jesus *also* desires that they be saved--he *wants* to give them eternal life (vv. 2, 24;<sup>1</sup> see John 6:39), but their salvation is not assured simply because they have been “given” to Jesus by the Father. This is shown in this very chapter, in v. 12 (a verse Ware understandably does not mention). In this verse Jesus refers again to “those which You have given Me,” and he says that “not one of them perished but the

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<sup>1</sup>In John 17:24 the verb is *thelo*, “I want, I desire,” as in Matt. 23:37.

son of perdition,” i.e., Judas. As Jesus says in John 6:70, “Did I Myself not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?” Clearly, Ware is wrong when he declares that “*each and every one* of those given to the Son is saved” (30m). God gave Judas to Jesus, but Judas was lost.

In summary, those *given* and *chosen* are the apostles, not believers in general; and they are given or chosen for service, not salvation. That they are unconditionally so chosen is irrelevant for the “predestination to salvation” issue.

The second passage is Acts 13:48, a verse almost uniformly translated in a way that pleases Calvinists: “As many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.” How can this be reconciled with the Arminian view? There is no need to invoke an implied foreknowledge here, nor to seek some esoteric meaning for the verb *tasso*. The key is to understand that the verb form (*tetagmenoi*) should be taken as *middle* (reflexive) voice, not passive. (Grammatically the form can be either.) Using the common connotation “to place, set, order, or arrange in a certain position,” we can see that the statement can quite validly be taken thus: “As many as arranged themselves unto (*eis*) eternal life believed,” or “As many as turned themselves toward eternal life believed.”

This agrees with the context, where the Jews’ response to the gospel is being contrasted with that of the Gentiles. Whereas the Jews rejected the gospel and judged themselves to be unworthy of eternal life (v. 46), the Gentiles received it gladly and embraced the message of eternal life (v. 48). In both cases the decision was a matter of free choice.

The third text is Romans 9:10-16, which Ware says is “one of the clearest and strongest assertions of the unconditional nature of God’s elect” (7b). I agree with that; but as I argue in my own essay herein, the point is unconditional election to *service*, not to *salvation*. Ware thinks he has refuted this approach to Romans 9 in part by pointing out that the Jews’ salvation definitely *is* in Paul’s mind as he writes this chapter (see 9:1-3; 10:1-4). This argument is fallacious, however, because the issue is not whether the *passage* is about salvation, but whether the *election* to which the passage refers is about salvation.

The key is to identify the specific issue with which Paul is dealing in this passage. I have argued (in my essay herein, and in my extensive commentary on Romans) that Paul is addressing

the existent or anticipated Jewish accusation that God is unjust (v. 14) because he has failed to keep his promise to national Israel (v. 6). Paul's answer may be summarized thus: You Jews *think* God has not kept his promise to you, only because you have misunderstood the *nature* of that promise (as Calvinists themselves do). I.e., you have mistakenly concluded that when God unconditionally chose you as his special people, this included a guarantee of salvation for every Jew. The fact is that most Jews are not saved--which grieves me to the very core of my being. But this does not mean that God has been unfaithful to you, because his choice of you as his special people was to service, not salvation--a choice he has a sovereign right to make. That you are not saved is not *God's* fault; it's your own fault because you personally chose to reject God's call to faith (9:30-10:21).

Thus, to be sure, the context of Romans 9 is about salvation, but not about unconditional election to salvation, except in a negative way, i.e., unconditional election to service does *not entail* unconditional election to salvation. God's promise to Israel (9:6) has not failed because, *contra* Ware (8a), it is *not* a "promise to save Israel."<sup>2</sup>

The fourth passage is Romans 11:5-7, where Paul refers to the remnant within Israel (see 9:6) that has been elected or chosen by grace. Ware interprets this as unconditional election because he assumes that it is the *same* election as in ch. 9, which is indeed unconditional election. He then uses the reference to grace (*eklogen charitos*, "election of grace") as further proof that the election of the remnant to salvation is unconditional.

This argument fails for two reasons. One, this is *not* the same election as in ch. 9. As explained above, ch. 9 *is* about unconditional election, but to service, not salvation. In 11:5 the election of the remnant *is* unto salvation. Two, it is simply false to assume that election according to grace must be unconditional. The error here is to equate *unconditional* and *undeserved*. As Ware rightly says, "Grace can only be grace if what grace gives is unearned, undeserved, and unmerited." His next statement is problematic, though: "If the gift of grace is

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<sup>2</sup>See my own essay in this volume for more details about Romans 9.

based upon<sup>3</sup> something that someone has done . . . , then grace ceases to be grace” (9b). This is supposedly taken from 11:6, where Ware equates “works” with “something done by the person” (10tt). I.e., anything “done by the person” is a work.

Ware’s latter statement is a serious misrepresentation of Paul, though, who says here that if election to salvation is election by grace, then it cannot be by *works* (11:6). But in light of everything Paul has already said in Romans 1-10, only a Calvinist could possibly equate “works” with “something done by the person.” Throughout his epistle Paul has clearly distinguished between *works* and *faith*. Both of these are “something done by the person,” but only works (“of law,” 3:28) are not consistent with grace (as in 11:6), whereas faith itself is utterly consistent with grace (4:16). Paul’s main point in Romans 1-8 is that there are two ways to approach salvation: the law way, where salvation is earned by works; and the grace way, where the salvation earned by Jesus Christ is freely given to those who believe (3:19-22, 28; 4:1-5; 9:30-32). The bulk of the Israelites were trying to be saved according to the law system, which is an impossibility for sinners (3:19-20); but the remnant accepted salvation according to the rules of the grace system, i.e., through faith, and thus became elect according to the principles of grace.

The phrase Paul uses (*eklogen charitos*) means literally “election of grace.” It does not mean (contra Ware, 9b) the election “that grace gives,” but the election that is *according to* grace. And grace is consistent with “something done by the person” as a condition for receiving it, if that “something” is faith. Only *works* are excluded in 11:6, not “something done by the person.”

The fifth and last passage for discussion is Ephesians 1, to which Ware gives the usual Calvinist spin. In this passage Paul declares that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world (v. 4); that he predestined us to adoption as sons according to the good pleasure of his will (v. 5); that he purposes to bring all things under the headship of Christ (vv. 9-10); and that we have been predestined according to the purpose of God, who works all things according to the counsel of his will (v. 11).

All of this, according to Ware, must refer to unconditional election. This is true, he says,

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<sup>3</sup>Ware does not allow for a proper distinction between “based upon” and “received by

because this election was “before the foundation of the world” (v. 4); thus it cannot have anything to do with our choices because we did not even exist at that point (10-11). “We did not yet exist, and so God’s election of us simply can have nothing to do with certain truths about us!” (12t). This is an extremely weak argument, though, in view of God’s “exhaustive definite foreknowledge,” the reality of which Ware himself argues for (32).

Ware’s other argument based on Ephesians 1 is that Paul says *everything* is done according to *God’s* will (v. 11). But if election is conditional, then in an ultimate sense this would be according to *our* wills, not God’s (pp. 10-11). “God works everything according to his will, but notice that nothing is said here about God working things out according to our wills!” (11a). In response to this, however, if we conclude that God’s original creative will was to make a world of free-will beings whose final destiny *does* ultimately depend upon their own choices, then both election and reprobation based on his foreknowledge of our free choices *is*--repeat, *is*--working all things out according to his will.

Regarding Ephesians 1 as a whole, I am not at all convinced that vv. 4, 5, and 11 are referring to individual election in the first place. I believe a strong case can be made for an entirely different approach, namely, that Paul is speaking of the predestination of the two different categories of the human race as commonly distinguished in his day, i.e., the *Jews* and the *Gentiles*. I base this case on two facts: 1) the sudden shift from first person plural to second personal plural in 1:13; and 2) the underlying theme of the letter as expressed in 2:11-3:21, i.e., God’s “eternal purpose” (3:11) of uniting Jews and Gentiles together through Jesus Christ into a single body, the church.

Here I will not elaborate on this latter point.<sup>4</sup> I will simply say that there is no doubt that God’s plan to embrace the Gentiles as fellow heirs with the Jews (3:6) was the source of Paul’s great joy and excitement throughout this epistle. This, not the alleged unconditional election of individuals as such unto salvation, is the source of Paul’s joy and strength even as he writes ch. 1.

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means of.” This is important, but it will not be discussed further here.

<sup>4</sup>See my earlier critique of Reymond for more on this point.

It surely is a great temptation to assume that all the references to “we” and “us” in Ephesians 1:3-12 include all believers as individuals. But this, I think, ignores the grand theme mentioned above, and also ignores the deliberate transition from first person to second person in vv. 12 and 13. In v. 12, “we who were the first to hope in Christ” must refer to the Jews (as a category, not every individual therein); and the preceding verses are a declaration of God’s blessings upon the Jews similar in content and purpose to Romans 9:4-5, and a reference to God’s grace in making salvation in Christ available first to the Jews. Then in v. 13, “in Him, you also” must refer to the Gentiles, who received the same gospel message as the Jews. This is the point of God’s bringing all things together under the one head, Jesus Christ (v. 10). This was the eternal purpose of God (1:11; 3:11), a purpose which he did indeed work out after the counsel of his own plan and will, using Paul himself as one of his main instruments (3:1-13).

Of course, all the blessings of salvation offered to the Jews as described in 1:3-12 were included in “the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation” as presented to the Gentiles (1:13). Both *groups* were unconditionally predestined to enjoy these blessings, but no *individuals* within either group were so predestined.

My remaining remarks will not deal with specific texts but with some specific claims that Ware makes in order to defend unconditional election. First is the claim that only unconditional election allows salvation to be “*all* of God.” If election is conditioned even on foreseen faith, then “human choice is ultimately decisive in personal salvation.” Thus at its most crucial moment, “salvation is *of us*, not of the Lord.” For one to make “any manner of contribution to his salvation” robs God of his glory and honor (p. 5t).

This also is typical Calvinist spin, this time on the implications of free will. Again, if God as Creator chooses to make a universe with free-will beings who may freely choose to sin and then freely choose to accept or reject the salvation God provides, that is his sovereign right; and his glory is manifest in the creatures’ exercise of the Creator’s gift of free will. Using our free will as such, as God intended us to do, in no way diminishes his glory.

Specifically, the idea that the free-will acceptance of the gift of salvation in some way diminishes God’s glory or even dilutes the salvation itself by contributing some alien content to it (e.g., our own faith) is ludicrous and needs to be clearly labeled as such. If someone were to

offer me a gift of one thousand dollars, my acceptance of that gift does not make it worth either more or less than a thousand dollars. There is absolutely no glory in accepting a gift, and accepting it does not detract from the honor due to the giver. In reference to God's gift of salvation, *rejecting* it diminishes God's glory (if that is even possible), not *accepting* it.

But do human beings have such a thing as free will in the first place? Ware claims that the Arminian concept of libertarian free will, or freedom to choose between opposites, does not really exist. If a person is equally able to choose A or not-A, he says, then a person has no specific, overriding reason to choose between them. Thus whatever one chooses must be arbitrary and indifferent, and thus is no choice at all (26tm). In my judgment this is a silly caricature, and mainly confuses the *ability* to choose between opposites with the *motive* one may have for such a choice.<sup>5</sup>

Although he rejects the libertarian concept of free will, like most Calvinists Ware defends another version of free will, often called compatibilism. The essence of free will, he says, is the ability to "do what we most want at any given moment" (26b). Thus when people choose to reject the gospel, they are fully responsible for that choice because they are acting "out of their own natures and inclinations, choosing and doing what they most want" (27b, see 28a).

This may sound like a concept of genuine free will, but in fact it is not. Defining free will as acting according to "whatever one most wants" is, from the Calvinist perspective, a cloak for determinism. Note that Ware says that "we cannot do other than the one thing we want *most* to do." I.e., "what we most want to do" is the same as "what we have to do" (26b). What Ware does not explain in this essay, though, is the *source* of this dominant desire or motive or inclination. According to Calvinism's concept of the eternal decree, God is the one who sovereignly implants within each individual's mind whatever dominant desire is necessary to produce the choice God himself wants.<sup>6</sup> Thus in the final analysis "we cannot do other than the one thing we want *most* to do" is the same as "we cannot do other than the one thing *God* most

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<sup>5</sup>For more on this see Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About God the Ruler* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1984), 193-194.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 175-179.

wants us to do.” This is not a truly free will; and the human being’s responsibility for his own acts, including his sins, is not preserved.

Another claim made by Ware is that God has (at least) two kinds of love: a general, equal love for all mankind, and a “particular, selective, and discriminate love for his own people” (22tm). The latter precedes any choices made by anyone, and is the source and cause of the predestination and salvation of God’s people. I agree that God has different kinds of love for people, or at least different *degrees* of love. I also agree that the divine love described in Isaiah 43:1-4 is selective and discriminating. However, the love described there is directed toward *Israel as a nation*, not toward any specific individuals within the nation. As Ware says, “Isaiah 43 demonstrates the love of God for his people Israel” (22b). This text, however, cannot be applied to individuals as such.

Does God have a different love for the saved than for the unsaved? In one sense, no. The love of God that motivated him to provide propitiation through Christ (1 John 4:10) is a universal love (1 John 2:2), and a love that precedes any love we have for him (1 John 4:19). In another sense, yes, God does love “his people” more than he loves unbelievers. This is not really a different kind of love, but a deeper love. The key point, though, is that this deeper love for his people is not unconditional but *conditional*. In John 14 Jesus clearly tells us that “he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him” (v. 21). Further, “if anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him” (v. 23). “The LORD loves the righteous,” says Psalm 145:8.

What of Ephesians 5:25, which says that “Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her”? Is this a discriminating, selective love, as Ware says (22-23)? No. Paul does not say Christ loved *only* the church and gave himself up *only* for the church. Christ loved all human beings and gave himself up for all (1 John 2:2; 4:10). Second Peter 2:1 is a crucial verse for helping us to understand this. Here Peter speaks of false teachers and heretics as those who are “even denying the Master who bought them.” The church is simply that collective body of believers who have accepted his love and his atoning sacrifice.

One last claim draws my attention, namely, that God has two wills in reference to the salvation of individuals, namely, his “universal saving will” (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9) and his



“specific and inviolable will” to save only some of those whom he desires to save (23-4). According to Ware, God does in fact will *not* to save some people whom he *could* save and actually *wants* to save. Why does he will *not* to save them? Because his own glory and his greater values and higher purposes require him to send them to hell anyway (25). This horrible idea is based almost solely on Romans 9:22-24, a text horribly distorted to draw the conclusion that the “glorious display” of God’s just wrath against deserving sinners all the more glorifies the grace of God in saving the elect. And only when God thus displays both his wrath and his grace will “the fullness of his matchless glory” be manifest. And surely “the glory of God is the supreme value of God” (25). Thus in effect God’s very *nature* requires him to do something that is contrary to his own *will*.

I should think that if one is proceeding through his interpretation of Romans 9,<sup>7</sup> using the Calvinist template of unconditional election and reprobation of individuals as his guide, by the time he gets to 9:22-24 and finds himself forced to draw such conclusions as the above, he would immediately say, “Something is wrong with this picture! Something is wrong with this concept! Something is wrong with this system!” Indeed there is. That “something” is Calvinism.

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<sup>7</sup>See my comments on Romans 9:22-24 in my critique of Reymond, above.