

Election and Calling: A Biblical/Theological Study (Dr. Greg Welty, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary)

Introduction

My assigned topic is: “Election and Calling: A Biblical/Theological Study”. According to my seminary president, Dr. Paige Patterson, “If one wishes to know what most Baptists believed during the formative days of the Southern Baptist Convention, he will discover it in this volume,” that is, in J. L. Dagg’s *Manual of Theology*.¹ He continues by saying that “Every pastor, professor, and seminary student should avail himself of the opportunity to become acquainted with one of the most sublime of our Baptist fathers” (ibid.). Since Patterson is the man who signs my paychecks, I figured I should take his advice. ☺ Having consulted J. L. Dagg, I commend him to you as well. I bring this up simply as a matter of full disclosure: there’s not much you’re going to get from me this afternoon that you won’t be able to find in Dagg, in particular in his chapter on the “Sovereignty of Grace” (ibid., Book Seventh, Chapter IV.)

My plan is simple. I want to defend both unconditional election and effectual calling, by (i) defining these doctrines, (ii) expounding some proof texts, and (iii) interacting with some criticisms. Like so many I lament the growing tensions within the convention on a number of fronts, but I see honest and respectful dialogue as one key way to promote unity. We’re not here to paper over differences in theology; we’re here to build bridges of communication. In fact, I’m convinced that we have a signal opportunity – as professors, pastors, and co-laborers in Christ’s kingdom – to set an important example of how Southern Baptists can and ought to dialogue about their differences without rancor or ill-will.

Unconditional Election

What is unconditional election?

Unconditional election is both an assertion and a denial. The ‘election’ part is the assertion, and the ‘unconditional’ part is the denial. Unconditional election asserts that God elects or chooses us for salvation, but unconditional election denies that this choice is on the basis of works or foreseen faith.

An assertion (or positive claim): God graciously chooses us for salvation.

The positive claim that God graciously chooses us for salvation is pretty uncontroversial among Christians in general, including Southern Baptist Christians in particular. Who would deny that God is a God who chooses kings for office, nations for service, and sinners for salvation? Even a casual perusal of a Bible concordance reveals that the terms ‘elect,’ ‘choose,’ ‘foreordain,’ and ‘predestinate’ are firmly embedded in the sacred text. Indeed, they are there by divine design, for our instruction and our comfort. On this much, we all agree: the blessings of God’s salvation are only available to sinners, and only come to sinners, by God’s choice. As Ken Keathley puts it,

¹ South Carolina: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1857 [Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1990]. The citation is from the inside back cover of the 1990 reprint.

“Election is the gracious decision of God by which he chooses certain ones to be the recipients of salvation.”² And as *The Baptist Faith & Message 2000* puts it,

Election is the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners. It is consistent with the free agency of man, and comprehends all the means in connection with the end. It is the glorious display of God’s sovereign goodness, and is infinitely wise, holy, and unchangeable. It excludes boasting and promotes humility.³

It seems that Southern Baptists unite around this positive claim as a matter of common confession.

A denial (or negative claim): God’s choice is not on the basis of foreseen faith or good works.

Clearly then, the controversy between Calvinists and non-Calvinists over unconditional election is not the Calvinists’ assertion that God elects some for salvation, since non-Calvinists believe this too. Rather, the controversy is over the Calvinists’ negative claim, namely, the denial that divine election unto salvation is on the basis of works or foreseen faith.⁴ But why should anyone, biblically or theologically speaking, so forcefully deny – as Calvinists do deny – that election is conditioned upon something foreseen in us?

Here I want to sketch the biblical and theological basis for this denial, and defend it from a few objections. In doing so, we’ll be in a position to better appreciate the other topic I’ll be addressing later: effectual calling.

Why believe in unconditional election?

Ephesians 1:3-11

There are several texts which appear to teach or at least strongly imply unconditional election. Probably the most well-known is Ephesians 1:3-11. At least three things leap out at us from this text:

Election is eternal

God is a God who “chose us in Him before the foundation of the world” (v. 4).⁵ God’s action of election does not await our fulfillment of certain conditions. According to Paul, God’s activity of choosing a people for himself was an accomplished fact before we were born, indeed, before there was even a world. This fact all by itself should fill us with astonishment and awe. If you are a Christian, you were not an afterthought in God’s thinking; rather, from all eternity he had you in mind and marked you out for a peculiar destiny.

² Ken Keathley, “The Work of God: Salvation,” ch. 12 of Daniel L. Akin (ed.), *A Theology for the Church* (B&H Academic, 2007). The citation is from p. 707.

³ Available at <http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp> (accessed 11/19/07). The citation is from section V.

⁴ As Keathley puts it, unconditional election means that “there is no consideration of any foreseen merit or faith on the part of the elect” (ibid., 708).

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from *The New American Standard Bible*. © Copyright © The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995. Used by permission.

Election is personal

According to Paul, God did not choose abstract categories, or hypothetical conditionals, and then say, “I thus choose you, O abstract category or hypothetical conditional! Whoever ends up having faith in Christ will end up being saved, and I choose that that’s the way it’s going to be. Whoever is in category A will end up being in category B as well.” Interesting theory, but far from the thought of the apostle Paul. God elects *people*, not categories or conditions. Paul says “He chose *us*” (v. 4), not that he chose a category. Paul says “He predestined *us*” (v. 5), not that he predestined a conditional to be true. Paul says “*we*... have been predestined” (v. 11). This is a matter of simple grammar, it seems to me, a matter of noting that there are personal pronouns throughout this text and that those pronouns refer to us, such that we are the direct objects of God’s choosing activity, not some abstract category.⁶

Election is grounded in God’s will

Election is grounded in God’s will, specifically, his will to love us, his will to be gracious to us, and his will to fulfill his purpose for us. Far from some cold, analytical move on God’s part, it was “*In love* [that] He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to himself” (vv. 4-5). It was “to the praise of the glory of his grace” (v. 6) that he so predestined us, indeed, “according to the riches of His grace” (v. 7).

Notice that in this passage *our will and what we do with it* is never mentioned as the basis of God’s choice. In fact, Paul repeatedly and emphatically draws our attention to *God’s will* as the foundation of our salvation. “He predestined us to adoption as sons,” not according to (or on the basis of) our will to choose him, but “according to the kind intention of His will” (v. 5). What is relevant in explaining the divine gift of salvation is “the mystery of His will” and “His kind intention” toward us (v. 9), not the mystery of our will or our kind intention toward him.⁷ Paul says “He chose us” (v. 4), and God chose us not because we were holy enough to make the right choice for him, but so “that we *would be* holy and blameless before him” (v. 4). In other words, election is unto holiness, not because of holiness.

Verse 11 is especially clear that election is grounded in God’s will: “having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will” (v. 11). In other words, God is a certain kind of God – a God “who works all things after the counsel of His will” – and it is “according to the purpose” of *that* kind of God that we have “been predestined.” Thus, Paul understands and accounts for the spiritual predestination of individuals in light of the broader, more general truth that God works (‘ενεργεω’) “all things” (not just some things) according to the purpose, intention, plan (‘βουλη’) of his will. Our particular predestination to salvation is just part of a larger purpose that embraces all events. Unconditional election is not some perplexing anomaly in our portrait of God, something to be explained away or passed over in embarrassment. Rather, in v. 11 Paul sees it as a natural consequence of his larger doctrine of God and his providence.

Surely, then, the notion that election is conditioned upon something in the creature cuts across the grain of this entire passage. To review my three points, Paul is teaching us that from eternity

⁶ Likewise for the other things Paul notes, such as the fact that God “has blessed *us* with every spiritual blessing (v. 3), that “He freely bestowed on *us*” his grace (v. 6), and that “*we* have obtained an inheritance” (v. 11). Throughout this passage the various divine activities are directed specifically to persons, not abstract categories or conditionals.

⁷ The latter just doesn’t seem to play any explanatory role at all, as to why God chose us to be saved.

past, it was an accomplished fact that God chose certain persons for salvation, and he did so on no other basis than that he willed to be loving and gracious towards them in this way. This and this alone accounts for Paul's repeated insistence that salvation is "to the praise of the glory of his grace" (v. 6), "according to the riches of his grace" (v. 7), and "to the praise of his glory" (vv. 12, 14).

Romans 9

The doctrine of unconditional election is confirmed when we turn to Romans 9. Although we do not have time to read the chapter in full, I think upon examination at least three things are evident from the text:

First, *Paul here addresses matters of spiritual salvation*, not merely election to temporal service or historical privilege. As Tom Schreiner puts it,

When Paul speaks of the anguish in his heart and his desire to be accursed because of his fellow Israelites (Rom 9:1-3), the reason he feels this way is not because Israel is merely losing out on temporal blessings. Distress torments his heart because his kinsmen from Israel were not saved. Paul is almost willing 'to be separated from Christ' (9:3) because his fellow Israelites are separated from Christ.⁸

Clearly, matters of eternal and spiritual significance were at stake in the unbelief of Israel, and Paul aims to reconcile this with the promise and faithfulness of God.

Indeed, if Paul was only talking about temporary, earthly blessings or mere historical privilege in Ro 9, why would the entire chapter be filled with the kind of language that Paul characteristically employs everywhere else to speak of *salvation and damnation*? – 'accursed', 'election', 'works', 'unrighteousness', 'mercy', 'compassion', 'wrath', 'destruction', 'saved', 'righteousness', 'righteousness of faith', 'by faith', 'by the works of the law', 'whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame', and so on. Surely mere historical destiny is not in view.

Rather, Paul is using historical examples to make a point about spiritual salvation, about the present-day *spiritual* status of his kinsmen according to the flesh. In effect, by talking about Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Moses and Pharaoh, Paul is building a case for a consistent *modus operandi* of God throughout history, and then explaining the present salvation of only a remnant of Israel in terms of a divine pattern that has been revealed from the beginning.

Second, Paul reveals that *God's own purpose and will have always been the ultimate reason why he chooses some and passes over others*. God says to Rebekah, "The older will serve the younger" (v. 12), and he says this "though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad" (v. 11a). Why would God do such a thing? Paul tells us: "so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls" (v. 11b). The reason why God distinguishes between Jacob and Esau, and elevates Jacob to a privilege higher than that which he would otherwise have obtained, was because of "God's purpose according to His choice," that is, "because of Him who calls."

Again, when God decides to give Moses the inestimable privilege of seeing the divine glory and goodness on Mt. Sinai, "He says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will

⁸ Cf. Thomas R. Schreiner, "Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election Unto Salvation? Some Exegetical and Theological Reflections," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36/1 (March 1993), pp. 25-40, for these and related arguments. The citation is from p. 27.

have compassion on whom I have compassion” (v. 15). This is not an uninformative tautology, but a divinely-instituted stopping point to all inquiry when it comes to grounding the selectivity of divine grace. The stopping point is God’s will, and we can reach no higher, nor should we want to do so.⁹ It is as if God were to say, “This is how I have always dispensed my blessings. It is a matter of my will to be merciful, compassionate, and gracious, and there’s an end on it. Salvation is ultimately a gift from above, bestowed by sovereign prerogative, not something owed to the creature or conditioned on the creature. It is not, ‘I will have mercy on who responds to me,’ but ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and that in turn will explain all else.’”

Again, God says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth” (v. 17). And what is Paul’s divinely-inspired inference from God’s *modus operandi*, as he surveys the historical record of God’s dealings with Isaac and Ishmael in the desert, with Jacob and Esau in the womb, with Moses on the mount and Pharaoh on the throne? “So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires” (v. 18). Once more, whether hardening continues as a form of divinely intended judgment, or mercy breaks through with divine power and secures divine blessing, it is all traced back to the divine will (‘θελεῖ’), and no further.

Third, *Paul clearly denies that God’s saving purposes are conditioned on how we use our will.* Probably the clearest text here is v. 16: “So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.” God’s electing purposes are not some sort of divine ratifying of human willing (“the man who wills”) or human effort (“the man who runs”). God’s electing purposes are not dependent on these things at all.

This is not to say that divine election has no place for human willing or effort in history. Nor is it to say that divine election is unrelated to our willing and efforts. It is simply to say that divine election is not *on the basis of* our willing and efforts. As Paul taught the Ephesians, election is *unto* holiness (1:4), and *that* certainly involves our will and our efforts. So our willing for God, and our effort on behalf of God, is quite important to God. As he commands the Philippians, “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (2:12). Nevertheless, the fundamental point remains: the fact *that* we will and work is ultimately due to God’s working in our lives, “for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (2:13). What the doctrine of unconditional election does is to trace this all the way back to the eternal and gracious purpose of God in our lives.

Notice how Paul’s response to the imaginary objector of v. 14 and v. 19 corroborates this interpretation. In response to the teaching on Jacob and Esau, the objector asks, “What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there?” (v. 14a). And in response to the teaching on Pharaoh, the objector asks, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists his will?” (v. 19). Paul’s response is, “May it never be!” (v. 14b), and “who are you, O man, who answers back to God?” (v. 20a). But if election were conditional, then Paul would have every reason to say, “Wait, you’ve misunderstood my teaching. God’s choice of men ultimately hinges on men’s choice for God, so it’s all fair in the end. We can resist God’s will, and if God foreknows that, he

⁹ Clearly, the surrounding context of Ex 33:19 (which Paul cites here in Ro 9:15) provides no reason *in Moses* as to why God should show him his glory on that occasion. Indeed, “the LORD said to Moses, ‘I will also do this thing of which you have spoken; for you have found favor in My sight, and I have known you by name’” (Ex 33:17). Note well: “for you have found favor in My sight,” not, ‘for I have found you to be favorable.’ And again: “for... I have known you by name,” not, ‘for you have made yourself renowned.’ The reason for God’s mercy and compassion on that occasion was the Lord’s own purpose and will.

wouldn't choose us to begin with. God's choice of Jacob was really based on Jacob's future choice for God. So of course there's no injustice here; God just saw the future and ratified Jacob's choice." No, in the face of the repeated accusation of injustice on the part of God, Paul does nothing to blunt the edge of his teaching about unconditional, divine selectivity in matters of grace.^{10 11}

What are some objections to unconditional election?

The Bible teaches that election is on the basis of our foreseen faith.

Some have argued that there are Scriptural texts which clearly contradict unconditional election, the so-called 'foreknowledge' texts. For instance, Ro 8:29 says, "For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren." So there's something prior to predestination, namely, foreknowledge. Likewise with 1Pe 1:1-2, which speaks of those "who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood." So God makes a choice, but it is a choice "according to the foreknowledge of God the Father." Given this, what could be clearer than that God predestines us on the basis of his foreknowledge of how we will in fact respond to him (or, alternatively, how we would respond if he were to give us his gospel)?

Well, not so fast. The proposed interpretation is neither necessary nor plausible. It's certainly not necessary, because neither text says that God elects us on the basis of *foreseen faith*. In fact, neither text even *mentions* faith as something foreseen at all, much less that election is based upon it.¹² Rather, in the "foreknew passages" (Ro 8:29; 1Pe 1:2), what is said to be foreknown are *people*, not faith or works. What Ro 8:29 says is: "*those* whom He foreknew, He also predestined..." It is *persons* who are said to be foreknown, not their acts of faith specifically. 1Pe 1:1-2 is even more ambiguous; it just mentions "foreknowledge" without clarifying whether the object of that foreknowledge is persons, or their faith, or their works, or anything else about them.

Not only is the 'foreseen faith' interpretation unnecessary (from a textual point of view), it's also implausible, for it would cut against the grain of everything we've already seen in Ephesians 1 and Romans 9. Instead of responding to the imaginary objector, "Who are you, O man, who answers back to God?" (Ro 9:20), Paul could have said, "What's the matter, didn't you read Ro 8:29? I already told you: all of this is based on foreseen faith. Human choices ultimately determine salvation, not God's will." But of course Paul does not say this, though that reply would be ready at hand in Romans 9 if in fact Ro 8:29 is speaking of foreseen acts of faith. In addition, there seems little reason for Paul to say in Ro 9:16, "So then it does not depend on the

¹⁰ As D. J. Moo puts it, "if Paul had assumed that faith was the basis for God's election, he would have pointed this out when he raised the question in v. 14 about the fairness of God's election. All he would have needed to say at that point was 'of course God is not unjust in choosing Jacob and rejecting Esau, for his choosing took into account the faith of one and the unbelief of the other.' Paul's silence on this point is telling". Cf. D. J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 583.

¹¹ Beyond Eph 1 and Ro 9, additional Scriptures pertaining to unconditional election include Ac 13:48, 1Th 5:9, and 2Ti 1:9.

¹² Obviously, God *does* foresee our faith, as he does all else. The question is whether in these passages Paul and Peter are even (i) referring to foreseen acts of faith, much less (ii) grounding election in these foreseen acts. I suggest there is little textual evidence for (i) and (ii) at all.

man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy,” if in Ro 8:29 he had just taught that election *does* depend on the man who wills. I think a principle of hermeneutical charity is relevant here: it is not only implausible but uncharitable to interpret Paul in a way that introduces palpable contradiction into his thought – and that in the space of two chapters – especially if said interpretation is textually unnecessary in the first place.

Those familiar with the Calvinist debate at this point are probably well aware of how Calvinists take these two texts. ‘Knowledge’ in Scripture often denotes a personal relationship entered into by choice, rather than bare cognition or awareness. For instance, God says through the prophet Amos, “1 Hear this word which the LORD has spoken against you, sons of Israel, against the entire family which He brought up from the land of Egypt: 2 ‘You only have I chosen [known; *yada*] among all the families of the earth; Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities” (Amos 3:1-2). Clearly when God says that Israel is the only family on earth he has known, he doesn’t mean he’s unaware of all the other nations. What he means is that Israel is the only nation *with whom he has entered into a specific covenant relationship* (which is why the New American Standard Bible translates *yada*’ in this text as “chosen”).

Likewise when Jesus warns religious hypocrites that on the last day, “I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness” (Mt 7:23). In saying he never ‘knew’ them Jesus is not saying he was cognitively unaware of them (as though afflicted with a case of divine amnesia). What he is saying is that he never had a saving relationship with them, despite their many words and outward deeds. It is this kind of intimate, personal, committed relationship that Calvinists suggest is being spoken of in these and other biblical texts (cf. Ge 4:1, Ex 2:25, Hos 13:4-5), and in Ro 8:29 and 1Pe 1:2 as well. God foreknows individuals, which is to say he *foreloves* them, and in virtue of that special, distinguishing love he marks them out for a peculiar destiny: conformity to the image of his Son (Ro 8:29), and obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood (1Pe 1:2).^{13 14}

In the end, the Calvinistic interpretation of the ‘foreknowledge’ texts is much more plausible because the background to the New Testament doctrine of election is surely God’s election of Israel in the Old Testament, and there it is clear that God’s election *is* according to foreloving. That is, the Lord chose them *because* “the LORD loved you” (Dt 7:6-8, 10:15-16). Ask an Old Testament Jew or a New Testament Christian why he was elected by God, and the answer is going to be the same: ‘Not because of anything in ourselves, but because God chose to set his love upon us.’¹⁵

¹³ To be sure, these texts do not *explicitly* say “whom God foreloved” or “chosen according to foreloving,” even as they do not explicitly say, “those whose faith God foreknew” or “chosen according to foreseen faith.” Both Calvinists and non-Calvinists need to admit that neither interpretation is textually necessary. Still, as seen above, in Scripture ‘knowledge’ *does* often have the connotation of purposed, intimate relationship, whereas there seems to be little to no biblical example of ‘knowledge’ standing in for ‘knowledge of foreseen faith’.

¹⁴ In addition, *pace* Arminian author Jack Cottrell, the Calvinist interpretation does not render Paul’s statement redundant, as if Paul were saying, “Those whom God has chosen, he has also chosen.” Rather, the idea is that to those whom God has foreloved, to them he has purposed a particular destiny as well, namely, being conformed to the image of God’s Son. The particular destiny (conformity to Christ) is grounded in a prior, distinguishing love. There’s nothing uninformative here; Ro 8:29 offers us a genuine explanation of why one follows from the other, rather than a case of divine stuttering. Cf. Keathley, *ibid.*, 717, who cites Cottrell as raising this objection.

¹⁵ The New Testament texts on election do not just drop from heaven fully-formed in ahistorical fashion; they occur as part of the climax of God’s redemptive plan in history, a plan which reaches back to the very beginning of the Old Testament revelation. It would be odd to suppose that Paul’s doctrine of election had little to do with how God elected his people in the past. Indeed, in Ro 9-11 Paul infers many truths about salvific election from God’s pattern

Arguments for unconditional election confuse faith with good works.

J. L. Dagg cites several texts which make it clear that “election is of grace, and not of works” (for instance, Eph 2:8-9, Ro 11:6, Ro 9:11, 2Ti 1:9). From this Dagg infers, “it necessarily follows, that election is not on the ground of foreseen faith or obedience”¹⁶ But although this is a popular argument among Calvinists, it does seem a bit quick. A non-Calvinist who believes in conditional election might accuse Dagg of treating saving faith as if it were a meritorious work, thus forgetting the obvious Pauline contrast between faith and good works. The advocate of conditional election might say, “God chooses us on the basis of foreseen faith, but I would never say that our foreseen faith constitutes *merit* before God, as if it is some kind of good work deserving of a reward. It isn’t. It’s faith, and Paul regularly *contrasts* faith and works in his teaching on justification (Ro 3:28, 4:2, 4:5, 5:1; Gal 2:16). The simple exercise of faith is the antithesis of relying on good works. So I can agree that God does not choose us based on foreseen *merit*, but continue to hold that God chooses us on the basis of foreseen *faith*. And that’s because the merit of works and the presence of faith are two very different things.”

Indeed, Arminian Donald M. Lake makes this very point in his contribution to the Clark Pinnock *Grace Unlimited* anthology, saying, “Calvinists never seem to be able to see this fundamental distinction unfortunately!”¹⁷ In short, election based on foreseen faith is *not* the same thing as election on the basis of good works, so Bible texts denying the latter should not be construed as denying the former. Thus, typical Calvinist arguments for unconditional election rest upon a confusion of Pauline categories, or so it would seem.

However, appearances here are deceiving. I agree that Calvinists need to make their case more clearly at this point. What they need to do is wholeheartedly affirm Paul’s contrast between faith and works, and then press the point that unconditional election is the only way to *account for* this Pauline contrast. After all, if our faith ultimately originates from us, and is not a gift of God given to us by the gracious choice of God, then why *wouldn’t* it be as meritorious as any other work done in obedience to God? The exercise of faith is said to be something that pleases God (Heb 11:6), the gospel summons to repentance and faith is a command of God (Mt 11:28; Ac 17:30), and Scripture says that God will punish all those who do not obey the gospel of God (2Th 1:8). So faith is a divine command directed to us and therefore a divinely-imposed obligation resting upon us. And if our obedience to that command were ultimately from us, then why wouldn’t we take credit for it? An *independently-exercised* faith would be meritorious. The only way Paul could consistently sustain this contrast between faith and works is by presupposing that faith is fully a work of grace.¹⁸ As D. A. Carson puts it, if five prisoners were to accept a pardon and five were to reject it, those who accept

are distinguishable from those who reject the offer solely on the basis of their own decision to accept the pardon. The only thing that separates them from those who are carted off to prison is

of historical election. In each case “it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy” (Ro 9:16). If God had grounded his choice of Israel in his ‘foreseeing’ of Israel’s future faith, then – given the subsequent history of Israel – that would have been a very poor choice indeed!

¹⁶ Dagg, *ibid.*, 312. Dagg cites his various Scripture texts on 311.

¹⁷ Donald M. Lake, “He Died for All: The Universal Dimensions of the Atonement,” in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark Pinnock (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1975), 43. I found this citation in D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (2nd ed.) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996), p. 121.

¹⁸ Notice here the intimate connection between the two main topics of this paper. Faith is the gift of God (effectual calling) given to us by the gracious choice of God (unconditional election).

the wisdom of their own choice. That becomes a legitimate boast. By contrast, in the Calvinistic scheme, the sole determining factor is God's elective grace (ibid., 121-122).

Another way to put it is to say that our salvation is not “to the praise of the glory of His grace” (Eph 1:6) if it ultimately depends upon our choice. For in that case, *we* made the ultimate difference between our being saved or not saved. So why shouldn't we get some of the credit? God's grace was insufficient to save us, since that grace didn't ensure our choice for him.¹⁹

If God unconditionally chooses us for salvation, then that means we don't 'really' choose him, which is clearly unbiblical.

Yes, it is clearly unbiblical to say that humans don't choose God. Indeed, humans *must* choose God (in Christ) for salvation, and we ought to be clear and unambiguous about the importance of this choice, especially when we preach the gospel. If there is no personal response to our Savior's summons to repentance and faith, then there is no salvation! Men and women must believe in Christ, they must choose Christ, for salvation. And the faithful preaching of the gospel – including its demands for a response – is a vital and powerful means in the hands of God towards eliciting such a choice (Ro 1:16, 10:8-17; Jas 1:18; 1Pe 1:23-25).

But thankfully Calvinists don't subscribe to an untenable dichotomy between divine choices and human choices. As with so much else in the Bible, the truth is not an either/or, but a both/and. The apostle John said, “We love because he first loved us” (1Jn 4:19). Note here the dual fact of choice: there is divine choice *and* human choice. But beyond this dual fact of divine and human choice there is a clear implication of asymmetry: we love *because* he first loved us. That is, God's love is the prior and determining factor in our love for him.

In fact, Jesus himself highlights this asymmetry and goes so far as to say to his disciples, “*You did not choose Me but I chose you*, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you.” (Jn 15:16). Now of course, humanly speaking the disciples *did* choose to follow Jesus; the gospels are replete with various accounts of their choices to follow him. Jesus is not denying this evident truth. But the point of his mild hyperbole is clear: Jesus' choice of his disciples was such a significant and determining factor in their subsequent life experience that in comparison it was *as if* the disciples did not choose him. Jesus is saying: My choice of you is the *reason* for all else!²⁰

¹⁹ According to *The Baptist Faith & Message 2000* (ibid.), election “excludes boasting and promotes humility” (section V). But as I have just argued, conditional election at least *appears* to do neither, though I make this point gently and with respect for those who disagree. Unconditional election is, for me, the only way to make sense of this part of the BF&M's claim about election, though I would not insist that my interpretation is the only acceptable one. (Requiring belief in alleged implications of a confessional document, beyond the explicit statements of the document itself, immediately defeats the purpose of a confessional document, which by nature is a *consensus* document that leaves at least some matters purposefully vague for the sake of unity. If the authors and revisers of the BF&M really intended to include unconditional election, it would be stated explicitly.)

²⁰ Notice that this biblically-endorsed asymmetry pretty much spells disaster for so-called ‘concurrency’ views of election, according to which divine choice and human choice are on a logical par, such that neither is logically prior to the other. Clearly, God's choice to love us *was* logically prior to his knowledge of our love for him, since Scripture says the latter depends on the former. In general, appealing to divine simplicity or timelessness to ground concurrency views proves far too much, for it would imply that *no* choice in God is logically prior to his knowledge of earthly events, which seems a bit much. For instance, surely God knows the Red Sea will be parted *because* God chooses to part the Red Sea; it's not the other way around! For a brief discussion (and endorsement) of concurrency

Moral and practical objections of various kinds

In this broad category I place objections that can be summarized thusly: “If unconditional election is true, then it turns God into a wholly arbitrary, morally reprehensible, insincere tyrant whose very existence renders all evangelistic efforts to be null and void.” We could call this the “Shrek” objection – Calvinism turns God into an ogre.²¹

My overarching strategy here is one I dub “Calvinistic telekinesis”. The critic fires his argument-arrows at the proponent of unconditional election, only to find these same arrows turning back 180 degrees and seeking *him* out instead. Less colorfully, I submit that each of the following criticisms, if sound, prove far too much: they prove we have reason to reject *orthodox theism*, Calvinistic or not. For each of these objections would apply to *anyone* who holds that (i) God exists, (ii) God is infallibly omniscient about the future, and (iii) God is a purposeful Creator (that is, he creates in order to realize intelligent and wise goals of some sort). Since these beliefs are held in common among evangelical Calvinists *and* non-Calvinists, the objections about to be discussed cannot be used to adjudicate the Calvinist/non-Calvinist debate. These objections are better seen as matters for intramural discussion among the family of faith, rather than reasons to reject Calvinism in favor of some other view.²²

If election is unconditional, then it must be arbitrary, random, and therefore lacking in wisdom.

Not at all, and here it’s clear the critic is involved in a *non sequitur* of some sort. It does not follow from the fact that God’s reason is not grounded in the creature, that therefore God doesn’t *have* a reason for his choice. We must not infer from our own ignorance of God’s reasons, that therefore God doesn’t have a reason. The issue here is parallel to that of creation. Why did God create the earth with its particular size, with its particular distribution of chemical elements, with its particular number of fellow planets in the solar system? Why did God create us such that we are capable of seeing the range of colors we do see, and no more or less? To be honest, I have no idea (and neither do you). Presumably, God had lots of options here, on these and an infinite number of other details. But does it follow from our ignorance as to *why* God created as he did, that therefore God’s act of creation was arbitrary, random, and lacking wisdom? Of course not.

Likewise with respect to the particularities of providence. Why did God choose Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees, rather than Joe Schmoe out of Babylon? Why did God have the disciples catch 153 fish rather than 154 (Jn 21:11)? To these and similar questions, I don’t have the slightest clue. Does it follow from my ignorance that therefore God didn’t *have* a reason? No. All that follows is that I am ignorant.

Likewise with respect to election. Why does God choose this one for salvation, and pass over that one? In general, because of his love and his justice, respectively. But why did his love result

views, cf. Keathley, *ibid.*, 718-723. For a helpful criticism of concurrence views, cf. Roger E. Olsen, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 68-69.

²¹ Shrek was, cinematically speaking, rather nice overall, but you get the idea. Perhaps Tolkien’s Balrog is more apt.

²² Logicians among us might suggest that I am falling prey to the *tu quoque*, or “you too,” fallacy. On this view, I am saying to my critics, “Your criticism doesn’t work, because it applies to you too.” And this *would* be a fallacy, since the fact that a *critic* is inconsistent doesn’t do anything to show that *the view being criticized* is consistent. But this isn’t what I’m doing. I’m not saying, “Your criticism doesn’t work,” but rather, “Your criticism can’t be used to adjudicate between our respective views, since it applies to *both* views, and therefore isn’t a reason to prefer one view over another.” And that seems right, as I am about to argue.

in *that* particular choice, of *that* particular person? I don't know. It doesn't follow from the Calvinistic claim – that God does not elect according to foreseen faith or merit – that therefore God has *no* reason for choosing to do what he does. For all we know, God *does* have a reason (perhaps a very, very complex reason, involving a multitude of greater goods) for choosing as he does. All the Calvinist is saying is that, whatever that reason might be, it has nothing to do with the foreseen faith or merit of the sinner who is elected to heaven.

So as a philosopher, the fallacy in this criticism is easy to spot. It illegitimately makes inferences from epistemology to metaphysics, in this case, from our lack of *knowledge* of reality to a lack in reality itself. In general, it doesn't follow from the fact that I don't know what God's reason is for something (or from the fact that God's reason isn't X), that therefore God doesn't *have* any reasons. So advocates of unconditional election can continue to affirm that election “is the glorious display of God's sovereign goodness, and is infinitely wise, holy, and unchangeable” (BF&M, *ibid.*, V).²³

If election is unconditional, then God is to blame for people being in hell.

The idea here is that there's something morally reprehensible in the idea of God even passing over some for salvation, when he could have saved all. If salvation depends upon man's free will, then presumably it's not God's fault that some perish eternally in hell. It's the fault of those on whom salvation depends, namely, men with free will. But if salvation depends (ultimately) on God's unconditional election, then it *is* God's fault that some are not saved. For it was within his power to save all. If salvation *ultimately* depends on God's choice, then it's *ultimately* God's fault that hell has a single person in it.

But once again, notice that if this argument works, then it proves too much, and tells against both Calvinist *and* non-Calvinist views. As long as God is both omniscient and omnipotent, then similar difficult questions can be asked about God's acts of *creation* and *providence*, quite apart from matters of election.

For instance, given God's foreknowledge, God creates at least some people whom he knows will never come to faith. Thus, he knows they will end up in hell if they are created. Knowing this, God creates them. Why would he do a thing like that? Why create people whom he knows will end up in hell, when it was in his power not to create them? Why would God deliberately and knowingly create individuals that he infallibly knows will never come to him? I don't know. But does the fact that I don't have an answer mean I should ditch the doctrine of divine omniscience? Of course not.²⁴

Or again, clearly it is an evident fact of history that there are multitudes of people who are born, live, and die, without ever hearing the gospel, even though it would be a trivial thing for divine omnipotence to directly reveal the gospel message to them. Again, why would God not ensure

²³ This is relevant to reprobation, since reprobation is simply the indirect result of God's decree to elect some to heaven. Why did God pass over some, and leave them in their sins? I don't know, specifically. I'm happy to confess I'm an ignorant Calvinist on this point. But my ignorance is hardly a good argument for the conclusion that God's decision was 'arbitrary'. Nothing at all follows about the 'arbitrariness' of God's decision, from the fact that I am largely ignorant of God's reasons.

²⁴ “If God knows that a certain person will freely accept the gospel while that person's brother freely will not, and yet God decides to create both of them anyway, then this is a mysterious, sovereign, and unconditional determination on the part of God” (Keathley, *ibid.*, 718). Thus, anyone who affirms the BF&M 2000, and is therefore not an open theist, in effect affirms a 'passive decree' of reprobation anyway.

they get the gospel message, when he could do so? I don't know, but does it follow that I should deny divine omnipotence? Of course not.

It's hard to tell, then, why the non-Calvinist position should be advertised as a moral *improvement* over the Calvinist position. When someone says that the Calvinist position implies that God not only elected some to heaven, but also (in virtue of that same act) condemned others to damnation, he is describing his own position as well. It's just that God's acts of creation and providence passively damns them, rather than the decree of election. While these are perplexing issues, what is the problem raised for the Calvinistic view of reprobation that cannot also be raised for any (reasonably orthodox) alternative view?²⁵

The bottom line is that the language of 'fault' or 'blame' is entirely inapplicable here to begin with. There is no 'fault' in God if he passes over some for salvation – whether by election, creation, or providence – for he didn't owe salvation to any. God is not defaulting on some sort of obligation to humanity if he doesn't secure the salvation of all. If salvation is in fact by God's grace, then it can't be something God is obligated to provide.²⁶

If election is unconditional, then God's gospel offer of salvation is insincere.

If God has elected only some to salvation, then how can God sincerely offer salvation to those whom he has already passed over? What, is God sincerely hoping that his decree is impotent? Is he sincerely hoping that a contradiction is true: that he both has and has not passed over some for salvation? The criticism here is that unconditional election makes the gospel offer insincere, if not meaningless, for multitudes of those to whom it comes.

But notice that precisely parallel questions can be raised for the non-Calvinist. Presumably, God infallibly knows who will and who will not come to faith, and he has known this from all eternity. How can God sincerely offer salvation to those whom he knows will never accept it? What, is God sincerely hoping that his infallible foreknowledge is mistaken? Is he sincerely hoping that a contradiction is true: that he both does and does not know what their response will be? Thus, if unconditional election makes the gospel offer insincere, then so does infallible foreknowledge.²⁷

²⁵ Dagg points out that “unless it can be shown that the election of grace lessens the number of the saved, no objection can lie against it, on the ground of its relation to God's benevolence” (ibid., 320). To be sure, given unconditional election, only some will be saved. But if election were instead conditioned on foreseen faith, would it follow that *more* people would be saved? Not at all; for all we know *fewer* people would be saved, if left to themselves apart from the gift of faith according to gracious election.

²⁶ Just to clarify my own views: unconditional election is not the 'mirror image' of reprobation in every respect. There are asymmetries here that must be maintained. Unconditional election is independent of merit (sinners do not deserve heaven on account of their works); reprobation is not independent of merit (sinners do deserve the judgment they receive in hell). Unconditional election involves God's causal activity (God chooses to work faith in the hearts of the elect); reprobation does not any direct causal intervention on the part of God (he doesn't have to *do* anything at all; he simply passes over sinners and leaves them in their sin). “The Reformed view teaches that God positively or actively intervenes in the lives of the elect to insure [sp] their salvation. The rest of mankind God leaves to themselves. He does not create unbelief in their hearts. That unbelief is already there. He does not coerce them to sin. They sin by their own choices. In the Calvinist view the decree of election is positive; the decree of reprobation is negative” (R. C. Sproul, *Chosen By God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1994), 142-143).

²⁷ Likewise for the perseverance of the saints, a doctrine to which all Southern Baptists are also committed (BF&M 2000, ibid., V). If God knows that all believers *shall* persevere to the end by his grace, and thus knows that their salvation is secure, then how can he be 'sincere' in commanding them to persevere, and to not fall away? And yet Scripture is filled with such commands (Heb 2:1, 4:11, 4:14, 10:23, 10:36).

In addition, Dagg argues that “in truth, there is no ground whatever for this charge of insincerity” (ibid., 319). If in every case in which men refuse to come to Christ, they are sent to hell, then God’s warning of judgment *was* sincere. “God proves his sincerity, by holding them to the obligation, and condemning their unbelief” (ibid.). And if in every case in which men come to Christ, they are heaven-bound, then God’s promise of blessing *was* sincere. “He promises salvation to all who believe in Christ; and he proves his sincerity, by fulfilling his promise in every instance” (ibid.). In effect, Dagg is asking, ‘What more do you want in a doctrine of sincerity?’ If God promised judgment on unbelief, and then didn’t bring it, *that* would be insincere. And if God promised heaven on belief in Christ, and then didn’t bring it, *that* would be insincere. But God *always* keeps his word, and in that respect he is as sincere as someone could possibly be. God doesn’t warn and promise and then turn around and say, “Oops, sorry, I was just joking! That’s not really true. Unbelievers will go to heaven and believers will go to hell, despite what I said.” So either the charge of insincerity applies to the Calvinist and non-Calvinist views alike, or (as Dagg argues) it is fundamentally misguided to begin with.

If election is unconditional, then there’s no reason to evangelize.

If God has determined from the beginning who will be saved, then why evangelize? Whoever will be saved will be saved, and whoever won’t, won’t. No one can do anything now to make God’s decree other than it is. So advocates of unconditional election should just sit home and do nothing, rather than reach the world for Christ.

As the reader no doubt expects, the problem here is that even if this argument had a chance of being sound, it would prove too much. In fact, if it were sound, it would exclude conditional election as well. After all, if God has infallible foreknowledge about the future, then he has already known from eternity who shall come to faith and who will not. So what would stop an advocate of conditional election from saying, “God knows who will come to faith, and thus it’s certain they *will* come to faith, for God cannot be mistaken in his foreknowledge. But if it has been certain from eternity (since God has known it from eternity), then why should I do anything to reach the lost? God already knows they’re going to be saved, he’s known this from eternity, and there’s nothing we can do to make his knowledge other than what it is.”

But, of course, this argument has no chance of being sound in either context, for it overlooks the fact that God is a God of *means*, as well as ends. God uses responsible human effort to bring his purposes to pass in history. If God has ordained not only X, but X-shall-come-about-by-way-of-Y, then doing Y is important, nay vital, in bringing X to pass. Indeed, apart from Y, X wouldn’t come to pass! For all I know, God has ordained that I shall be the one who shall call many to faith in my lifetime. If so, I’d better get busy! In fact, the Scriptures present election as a motivation *for* vigorous effort on behalf of Christ’s kingdom. “For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory” (2Ti 2:10).

I conclude that this final grab bag of four moral/practical objections are ‘family problems,’ questions that the entire community of orthodox believers must work on and strive to answer, and that’s because they are applicable to both Calvinism *and* any reasonably orthodox alternatives to Calvinism. These are not ‘special’ problems for the Calvinist alone, problems which can be cited as a means of preferring one view to the other. For the most part, the fact that *we believe in God* is sufficient to generate most of these questions. I think the identification of red herrings like these can have a salutary effect on future discussion. It frees us up to focus upon

the actual biblical materials and the best way to interpret them, without being distracted by these extraneous (because irrelevant) questions. It does no good to raise a point as a means of adjudicating between A and B, if that point tells against *both* A and B.

Effectual Calling

What is effectual calling?

In transitioning now from unconditional election to effectual calling, we move from God's *planning* of salvation in eternity past to God's *bringing about* that salvation in the historical present. Of course, God does many things in order to both accomplish salvation on our behalf and apply salvation to our hearts: he sends Christ to die on behalf of sinners, justifies us, adopts us into his family, sanctifies us, enables us to persevere to the end, and brings us into glory forever after. But the one aspect of salvation on which I want to now focus is 'effectual calling.' Effectual calling makes two assertions: God calls sinners to himself (he both invites and commands them to repent of their sins and place their faith in Christ), and there is a call of God which is effectual (because it explains why we exercise both repentance and faith). As will be seen, each assertion carries with it a crucial distinction.

God calls sinners to himself (not just the outer call, but also the inner call).

Advocates of effectual calling are clear that God calls sinners to himself for salvation. However, they make a distinction between the 'outer call' (which goes to all to whom the gospel is preached, and which may not result in faith and repentance) and the 'inner call' (which goes to the elect alone, and conveys the gift of faith and repentance).

God's call is effectual (not just a necessary, but also a sufficient condition).

In addition, advocates of effectual calling stress that the 'inner call' is the means God uses to work faith and repentance in the heart. It is 'effectual' because it *does something* in the life of the sinner. However, here Calvinists make a distinction between something being *necessary* for faith and repentance, and something being *sufficient* for faith and repentance, and they insist that the effectual call belongs in the latter category, not merely in the former.

Most evangelicals have little problem with saying that God's work of grace upon the human heart is *necessary* if we are to repent and believe the gospel. For instance, (classic) Arminians typically hold to a doctrine of universal, prevenient grace, a work of God's Spirit which goes to all human beings, and is required to enable otherwise depraved men and women to believe the gospel. On this view, prevenient grace gives us back our free will that we lost in Adam, and then it is ultimately up to us how we use that free will (we can use it to either accept or reject the offer of salvation).²⁸ The real controversy between Calvinists and non-Calvinists is whether God's

²⁸ Cf. Roger E. Olsen (ibid.), who speaks of the "gift of God through prevenient grace – grace that precedes and enables the first stirrings of a good will toward God" (20). "Prevenient grace is simply the convicting, calling, enlightening and enabling grace of God that goes before conversion and makes repentance and faith possible" (ibid., 35). "From the Arminian perspective prevenient grace restores free will so that humans, for the first time, have the ability to do otherwise – namely, respond in faith to the grace of God or resist it in unrepentance and disbelief" (ibid., 76).

work of grace upon the human heart is *sufficient*, in any individual case, to bring someone to repentance and faith.²⁹

Dagg offers a useful summary:

Besides the call which is external, and often ineffectual, there is another, which is internal and effectual. This always produces repentance and faith, and therefore secures salvation... It is not true of all who receive the external call, that they are predestinated to life, justified, and saved. Whenever these blessings are represented as belonging to the called, the internal and effectual call must be meant (ibid., 332).

Here I want to sketch the biblical and theological basis for effectual calling, and defend it from a few objections.

Why believe in effectual calling?

A distinction between the outer call and the inner call

There are several texts which appear to teach or at least strongly imply a distinction between the outer call and the inner call. In his parable of the wedding feast (Mt 22:1-14), Jesus contrasts those who were invited to the feast but did not come (vv. 3-8) with those who were actually “gathered together” by the king’s slaves so that they filled the wedding hall (vv. 9-10). Jesus seems to contrast these two groups: “For many are called, but few are chosen” (v. 14). The first group received the outer call, which was resisted, but the second group responded to the summons. Thus, the usage of ‘call’ (κλητοι) envisioned in v. 14 is an outward call to all, a call that can and often is successfully resisted by those to whom it comes.³⁰

But another usage of ‘call’ (καλεω) appears in the epistles: the inward, effectual call. For instance, Paul says those “whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified” (Ro 8:30). Here the ‘called’ seems to refer to the inner, effectual call, for according to Paul everyone who receives *this* call is also justified and glorified. (The repetition of the near demonstrative pronoun τουτους seems to indicate that the *same* group of people is the object of *each* divine activity in the series, such that whoever is the recipient of one blessing is thereby the recipient of the rest as well.)

²⁹ Since the terminology of ‘necessary’ and ‘sufficient’ is teleological in character – necessary *for what?* sufficient *for what?* – its context of usage must always be specified to avoid confusion. For instance, Keathley speaks of “sufficient overcoming grace” and contrasts this with “limited irresistible grace” (ibid., 724-725). However, what *he* means by ‘sufficient’ is different from what *I* (and most Calvinists) mean by ‘sufficient’ when speaking of effectual calling. For Keathley, sufficient overcoming grace is “the convicting and enabling work of the Holy Spirit accompanying the preaching of the gospel” (ibid., 726). Nevertheless, “God’s grace can be successfully resisted” (ibid.). In other words, paradoxically, Keathley’s “sufficient overcoming grace” is not sufficient to overcome all resistance on the part of the sinner (although it is necessary!). By way of contrast, the view Keathley terms “limited irresistible grace” is closer to the view I am defending, since “this work always accomplishes the task of drawing his chosen to himself” (ibid., 725) – that is, it’s sufficient to overcome the sinner’s resistance. (I don’t intend this as a criticism of Keathley, just a clarification of my own view in light of his terminology.)

³⁰ Likewise, in Luke’s recounting of a similar parable, the master’s command to the slave was, “Go out into the highways and along the hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste of my dinner.” (Lk 14:23). Again we see two distinct groups, who are recipients of two different calls: those who were merely invited did not make it to the meal, whereas those who were *compelled* to attend presumably did so.

Paul tells the Corinthians that “we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Co 1:23-24). Notice how “the called” are set in contrast to those Jews who heard the message but stumbled at it, and those Gentiles who heard the message and regarded it as foolishness. Clearly for Paul “the called” are not those who merely hear the gospel, but are those who in fact embrace it. They are those who are called *effectually*.

Likewise, Peter exhorts his readers to pursue various qualities of Christian character, as a means to “be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you” (2Pe 1:10). Clearly, Peter is not asking his readers to make sure that they heard the gospel outwardly and verbally! He is using “calling” in its inward, effectual sense: make certain that *you are a believer*.

Finally, Jude says that he is writing his epistle “to those who are the called, beloved in God the Father, and kept for Jesus Christ” (Jude 1). This certainly seems to imply that there is a sense in which “the called” just are those who are in fact saved – that is, not only “beloved in God the Father,” but also “kept for Jesus Christ” – which certainly is not the same group of people who merely hear the gospel outwardly.

God’s work of grace in calling a sinner to himself is *sufficient* for that person to come to faith

But beyond this biblical distinction between the outer call and the inner call, there are in addition quite a few texts which seem to teach that God’s work of grace in calling a sinner to himself is *sufficient* for that person to come to faith. It *ensures* the presence of faith and repentance, because these gracious gifts of the Spirit of God are in fact *conveyed* by the effectual call. For instance, Paul tells the Philippians that to them “it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (Php 1:29). Here faith itself, not just suffering, is said to be a gift of God.

Likewise, Luke records the reply of Peter and the apostles to the Sanhedrin: “He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, *to grant repentance to Israel*, and forgiveness of sins” (Ac 5:31). So not only faith, but also repentance, is granted as a gift by the risen and exalted Savior. This view is confirmed by Paul’s instruction to Timothy, that he should gently correct “those who are in opposition, if perhaps *God may grant them repentance* leading to the knowledge of the truth” (2Ti 2:25; cf. Ac 11:18).

Indeed, for Lydia, “the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul” (Ac 16:14), and for the Gentiles more generally, “as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed” (Ac 13:48). God’s effectual work in bringing a sinner to himself is likened to *a resurrection from the dead*: “even when we were dead in our transgressions, [He] made us alive together with Christ” (Eph 2:5). His work is likened to something we clearly did not accomplish by our own power or on our own initiative, namely, *being born*: “according to His great mercy [He] has caused us to be born again to a living hope” (1Pe 1:3). And this birth was “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (Jn 1:12-13). In the end, it is “by His doing you are in Christ Jesus” (1Co 1:30).³¹

³¹ The reader will have to forgive my offering a catena of uninterpreted Scripture texts. But I do think these are most naturally interpreted as supporting my overall thesis that God’s regenerating work in our lives not only makes possible, but in fact *secures* the intended blessing: faith, repentance, and new life in Christ.

John 6

But perhaps the most discussed and, I believe, the most persuasive passage in support of effectual calling is John 6. Consider the following points.

First, Jesus makes ‘coming to Christ’ (“He who comes to Me”) parallel to ‘believing in Christ’ (“he who believes in Me”), which strongly indicates that they are in fact the same thing. Coming to Christ *just is* to exercise saving faith in Christ. “And Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst’” (Jn 6:35).

Second, Jesus teaches that no one can exercise saving faith unless God specifically draws that person to do so. “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day” (Jn 6:44). In fact, no one can exercise saving faith unless ‘it’ (the faith, the coming to Christ) has been granted by God. “And He said, ‘Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father’” (Jn 6:65).

But is this really a proof of effectual calling? Many non-Calvinists have responded to John 6 by arguing that these texts only prove that the Spirit’s work of ‘drawing’ is *necessary* for men to come to Christ, not that it is *sufficient*. Why can’t someone agree that no one can come to Jesus except the Father draws him, but also maintain that the Father draws everyone equally, all the time? Thus, the Spirit’s work is *needed* if someone is going to come to faith, but that work certainly doesn’t *ensure* a particular outcome. The drawing of the Spirit is universal, not selective.

The problem with this approach is that it is exegetically implausible. In particular, vv. 64-65 reveal that it is precisely in terms of a distinction which *the Father makes* – in who he grants to come to Jesus – that Jesus uses to *explain* the unbelief of those who rejected him. But this explanation (which is the explanation Jesus gives) couldn’t *be* the explanation if the Father drew everyone equally. Consider the text: “64 ‘But there are some of you who do not believe.’ For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray Him. 65 And He said, ‘Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father’” (vv. 64-65). Pay careful attention to the role of the ‘therefore’ in v. 65. According to Jesus, the *reason* why these Jews didn’t believe (v. 64a) was because it wasn’t granted to them by the Father (v. 65). This couldn’t be the case if the non-Calvinist were correct, that is, if God drew everyone equally. For on that view, God grants *everyone equally* to come to the Father, by the universal drawing of his Spirit. How can it be that the Father draws everyone *equally* (according to the non-Calvinist), and yet it is the *selectivity* of such drawing that explains the Jewish unbelief (according to Jesus)?³²

So I conclude that the drawing of men and women by God’s Spirit is not only necessary but sufficient for their coming to Christ, that is, for their exercising saving faith. It *secures* this outcome by the power of God. Notice that the doctrine of unconditional election seems to

³² “The only point that Jesus can sensibly be making by his statement in 6:65 is that those resistant to him do not believe because they are not so drawn by the Father. He surely is not saying to people who are drawn by the Father that only those drawn by the Father can come. This would do nothing to explain what the context of this passage demands: why his opponents remain in their unbelief” (Bruce Ware, “Effectual Calling and Grace,” ch. 8 of Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware (eds.), *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000), 219). I highly recommend Ware’s entire discussion of Jn 6 (cf. *ibid.*, 212-220).

confirm this view. That men and women come to faith is ultimately the outcome of an eternal, divine plan that it shall be so. In this very chapter Jesus seems to teach that there is a people whom the Father has given to Christ, and this people *shall* come to Christ: “All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out” (Jn 6:37). In fact, this verse seems to teach unconditional election (“All that the *Father* gives to Me”), effectual calling (“*shall* come to Me”), and perseverance of the saints (“and the one who comes to Me I will *certainly not* cast out”).³³

What are some objections to effectual calling?

Regeneration cannot ‘precede’ faith, because they occur simultaneously in Christian experience.

Calvinists typically hold that the exercise of faith and the reality of regeneration are simultaneous, chronologically speaking. They happen at the same time. As Keathley puts it, “At the moment a person believes, he is also regenerated” (ibid., 705). Both Calvinists and non-Calvinists can agree about this simultaneity.

But this chronological simultaneity surely doesn’t preclude there being a logical asymmetry, such that one thing logically depends upon the other. In everyday life, quite apart from theological matters, I think we recognize that something can logically depend upon something else, and not vice-versa, even if they both happen together. For instance, when Socrates drinks the hemlock and dies, Xanthippe becomes a widow. Presumably, these two events are simultaneous: Socrates’ dying and Xanthippe’s becoming a widow. And yet clearly one event *explains* the other. It is *because* Socrates dies that Xanthippe becomes a widow. It would be absurd to think that it is the other way around: that it is because Xanthippe becomes a widow that Socrates dies. Clearly one event has logical priority over the other, and therefore explains the other, even if both happen together, with no chronological gap whatsoever.

So it is, Calvinists claim, with respect to regeneration and faith. Regeneration ‘precedes’ faith not chronologically, but logically. It explains why we have faith in the first place.³⁴

The Scriptures teach that God’s grace is often resisted.

Consider Stephen’s words to the Sanhedrin: “You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did” (Ac

³³ Does the BF&M 2000 teach effectual calling in the sense I am defending? It seems to me that section IV.A of that document (about “regeneration”) is quite compatible with my view. But it is also ambiguous, such that both proponents and rejecters of effectual calling can endorse that section. It all depends on whether the antecedent of “to which the sinner responds” is “conviction of sin” or “a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit”. Reasonable people can disagree on the best interpretation here, so perhaps the best view is that the BF&M neither rejects nor requires the doctrine of effectual calling. The section in question reads: “Regeneration, or the new birth, is a work of God’s grace whereby believers become new creatures in Christ Jesus. It is a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Repentance and faith are inseparable experiences of grace” (BF&M 2000, ibid., section IV.A).

³⁴ Of course, this defense of the *coherence* of the Calvinist doctrine is no proof that the doctrine is *true*; for that, see the earlier presentation of the relevant biblical materials. But hopefully it does clear up some misconceptions about what it means to say that regeneration – which is implied in effectual calling – precedes faith. No chronological priority need be implied.

7:51). But if men “are always resisting the Holy Spirit,” then God’s grace is not ‘irresistible’ (as Calvinists often put it), and so the doctrine of effectual calling seems untenable.

In reply, to be sure, men *do* reject God’s grace again and again. Indeed, the Calvinistic doctrine of an outer, external call *just is* a call that can and often is successfully resisted by those to whom it comes (cf. the discussion of Mt 22:1-14 above). But the question is whether a man can successfully resist *when God’s individual purpose towards that man is to draw him to himself?* The Calvinistic doctrine of effectual calling was never meant to preclude the phenomenon of men resisting God in general. Rather, it precludes the notion that, once God has set his purpose of saving grace upon a person (so that he is made willing by God’s grace), that person can somehow *continue* to successfully resist. This the doctrine of effectual calling denies.

Effectual calling is a form of coercion.

Calvinists typically conjoin their doctrine of effectual calling with a doctrine of total depravity, which holds that unbelievers would never *want* to come to faith – indeed, *cannot* come to faith – apart from God’s effectual call in their lives. (Indeed, the doctrine of effectual calling is often *motivated* by way of the biblical materials in support of total depravity.)

But if it is true that we would never come to God on our own, and if effectual calling not only makes possible but confers the twin gifts of repentance and faith, then is this not a form of coercion, of forcing someone to both choose and act against his will? Does not conversion, Calvinistically construed, do violence to the will of man? Here we are with all of our sinful desires, rebelling against God, and God unilaterally changes our nature so that we choose him. Thus, he goes against our will, which is to say, he coerces us.

Two brief replies are in order. First, what’s so bad about coercion? To be sure, if coercion were the *central and pervasive* element in human-human and divine-human relationships, that would tend to undermine the integrity of those personal bonds. No relationship would be attractive or desirable if it proceeded *primarily* by way of coercion. Nevertheless, in some contexts coercion is not only acceptable, but praiseworthy. If a neighbor’s house were on fire and yet there he sat, enamored with some trifling pastime as the burning walls began to collapse on all sides, surely I would be regarded as a hero if I snatched him up and removed him from danger, all without the consent of his will. He might even come to his senses later and thank me for engaging in such decisive effort on his behalf. Why can’t this be an acceptable analogy for what God does on our behalf in effectual calling and regeneration? Would the redeemed in heaven really say, “Nice place you’ve got here, God, but why didn’t you respect my will and let me slide into hell? Not sure I can have a real relationship with you...”

Second, it’s not clear that the Calvinistic view *is* a form of coercion anyway. Since freedom from coercion means having the freedom to do what you want to do, then yes, if you do something even though you didn’t want to do it, that would be coercion. But at no stage in the Calvinistic pre-conversion/conversion/post-conversion story is the sinner forced to *do* anything he does not want to do. Rather, God (mysteriously, no doubt) changes our wants. We go from wanting our idols and sins, to wanting God and righteousness. But wants aren’t actions. So regeneration doesn’t produce any actions that go against our wills. Instead, regeneration is a matter of God’s *renewing* the will, so that the whole person delights in God and is inclined to find him wholly attractive, to prefer him above all else. And with that renewed will, we choose in accordance with it, and we choose Christ. At every stage in this story, we are doing what we want to do. And

so at every stage in this story, we are free from coercion. It is never a matter of God's making someone act *contrary to his will*.³⁵

Effectual calling carries with it all the problems of unconditional election.

Yes, and these problems can be dispensed with in the same way as before. For instance, Keathley says,

The problem with this view [i.e., irresistible grace or effectual calling] is that it freely accepts the notion that God offers salvation from eternal damnation while at the same time withholding the ability to accept it. The irresistible grace position ensures a purely gracious salvation but does so at a high cost. The logical conclusion is that those who reject the gospel remain lost because God wants them lost (Keathley, *ibid.*, 725).

But if this argument is a good one, then we have another “logical conclusion” on our hands, one that applies whether we're Calvinists or not: those who never hear the gospel remain lost because God wants them lost. After all, God could easily *get them* the gospel (he's omnipotent). In fact, the problem looks *worse* in this case: it's not just that God won't do what would be sufficient for their salvation (as in the case of effectual calling); it's that God won't even do what would be *necessary* for their salvation (get them the gospel). But if this state of affairs isn't a reason to reject the non-Calvinist view, why would it be a reason to reject the Calvinist view?³⁶

Conclusion

In conclusion, you may wonder if I have any advice for Southern Baptists who are engaged in the so-called Calvinist/Arminian debate. Yes, I do. To my non-Calvinist brothers, I say: Please consider the arguments I have given, and reflect carefully upon the Scriptures that I have brought to your attention. May the Lord give you insight into all this. (And if you buy the book, please read the footnotes!)

To my fellow Calvinists, I'm going to be a bit more blunt (as is my right; I've just defended our distinctive views!). There is a distinction between *esse* and *bene esse*. There's a difference between a doctrine being part of the essence of the gospel (its *esse*), and a doctrine being part of the well-being of the gospel (its *bene esse*). In light of this, I find the popular Spurgeon quote to be unhelpful, that “Calvinism is the gospel.” I understand what Spurgeon was trying to say, but I think it can be both misleading and unhelpful, to the extent that I never use that quote myself. It's just not worth it, for it usually generates more heat than light. Surely we don't want to get someone to think that he has to believe in all the traditional points of Calvinism if he is going to believe the gospel, and yet that is exactly what that quote can convey if it is tossed around loosely. Most of the evangelical non-Calvinists I know may not believe in the five points of Calvinism, but they do believe in the five *solas* of the Reformation, and even if you think that is inconsistent, God never sent a man to hell for being inconsistent, but only for his sins.³⁷

³⁵ The 1689 Second London Baptist Confession of Faith makes this point rather well: “effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ; yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by his Grace.” Available at <http://www.ccel.org/creeds/bcf/bcfc10.htm> (accessed 11/19/07). The citation is from section X.1.

³⁶ In general, effectual calling doesn't seem to raise any difficulties that aren't already raised against unconditional election, including the moral/pragmatic objections already considered under that heading.

³⁷ If it is a sin to be inconsistent, God have mercy on us all!

Far better to simply give the arguments for Calvinism as best you can, and pray that the Lord blesses your efforts. So I would counsel my fellow Calvinists in the SBC not to say, “Arminianism denies the essence of the gospel,” but rather, “Calvinism promotes the well-being of the gospel, by bringing out for God’s people all the more clearly how grace is really grace.” Non-Calvinists may disagree even with this latter statement, but at least they’ll know what our motives are: to magnify the greatness of God’s grace, not to draw the circle of fellowship more narrowly than Christ himself has drawn it.