

# Reformed Understandings of Predestination

Developments in the Doctrine of Election:

From John Calvin to Karl Barth

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Led by Rev. Dr. Rob Spach

# A Common Misunderstanding of Salvation

If you are a good person, you will go to heaven.

If you are a bad person, you will go to hell.

# A Common Protestant Understanding of Salvation

“Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?”

“If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”  
(Romans 10:9)

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8 – 9)

# A Common Protestant Understanding of Salvation

## *Key elements:*

- one makes a choice to accept Jesus Christ as Lord (or makes a choice not to accept him)
- one confesses publicly that Jesus is Lord
- one believes in one's heart
- one affirms that one is saved not by good works but by God's grace through faith
- God provides the means of salvation –Jesus Christ– but we humans still have to choose whether to accept the offer to be saved, or be condemned by our refusal to do so.

# The Reformed Doctrine of Election

- God is Sovereign, Just, and Merciful.
- Human beings were created by God and are therefore subject to the will of God.
- All people have sinned and deserve to be condemned by God.
- Because humans are in bondage to sin, no one can claim any merit or a right to be saved due to their “good works” or “right beliefs.”
- Human salvation is therefore a matter of God’s gracious choice, not human choice. That can be understood as good news!

# One Understanding of Election: Double Predestination

- From before creation, God has chosen (or “elected”) some people to receive mercy through Jesus Christ, so that their sins are forgiven and they are justified before God. Their salvation is a gift of grace from God.
- All other people are not among the elect. They are “outside Christ” and will experience God’s just condemnation due to their sin.
- The election of each person is a matter of God’s free choice. If God has predestined a person for salvation, they will receive mercy from God. If God has predestined a person for condemnation, they will receive justice from God.

# Calvinistic Understanding of Election: TULIP

Total Depravity

Unconditional Election

Limited Atonement

Irresistible Grace

Perseverance of the Saints

Scripture references:

Romans 9:18, 22 – 23; Ephesians 1:3 – 5

# Second Helvetic Confession (1561)

## *CHAPTER X: Of the Predestination of God and the Election of the Saints*

### 5.052 GOD HAS ELECTED US OUT OF GRACE.

From eternity God has freely, and of his mere grace, without any respect to men, predestinated or elected the saints whom he wills to save in Christ, according to the saying of the apostle, “God chose us in him before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4).

### 5.053 WE ARE ELECTED OR PREDESTINATED IN CHRIST.

Therefore, although not on account of any merit of ours, God has elected us, not directly, but in Christ, and on account of Christ, in order that those who are now ingrafted into Christ by faith might also be elected. But those who were outside Christ were rejected.

## Second Helvetic Confession (1561)

5.055 WE ARE TO HAVE A GOOD HOPE FOR ALL.

And although God knows who are his, and here and there mention is made of the small number of elect, yet we must hope well of all, and not rashly judge any man to be a reprobate.

5.057 WHAT IN THIS MATTER IS TO BE CONDEMNED.

Therefore we do not approve of the impious speeches of some who say, “Few are chosen, and since I do not know whether I am among the number of the few, I will enjoy myself.” Others say, “If I am predestinated and elected by God, nothing can hinder me from salvation, which is already certainly appointed for me, no matter what I do. But if I am in the number of the reprobate, no faith or repentance will help me, since the decree of God cannot be changed. Therefore all doctrines and admonitions are useless.”

## Second Helvetic Confession (1561)

### 5.059 WHETHER WE ARE ELECTED.

We therefore find fault with those who outside of Christ ask whether they are elected. And what has God decreed concerning them before all eternity? For the preaching of the Gospel is to be heard, and it is to be believed; and it is to be held as beyond doubt that if you believe and are in Christ, you are elected.

# The Westminster Confession of Faith (1649)

## *OF GOD'S ETERNAL DECREES*

1. God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass ...
3. By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others fore-ordained to everlasting death.

## The Westminster Confession of Faith (1649)

5. Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his free grace and love alone, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace.

# The Westminster Confession of Faith (1649)

6. As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, fore-ordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore they who are elected being fallen in Adam are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season; are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power through faith unto salvation.

7. The rest of mankind, God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice.

# Double Predestination and the *Deus Absconditus*

*Question about Double Predestination:*

How are we to understand the nature of a God who elects some and does not elect others?

*Reply in Calvin's theology:*

We cannot understand it. That is part of *the hiddenness of God*, the fundamental unknowability of the essence of God.

*Isaiah 45:15*

Latin: "vere tu es ***Deus absconditus*** Deus Israhel salvator."

English: "Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior."

# Barth's Understanding of Election: Christ as the crux

Karl Barth (1886 – 1968) -- Swiss pastor and theologian

- Barth rejected the idea of the *Deus absconditus* as basis for understanding the doctrine of election
- rejected double predestination; it made God seemed arbitrary
- affirmed the centrality of the *Deus revelatus* in Jesus Christ
- election and predestination can only be understood properly in light of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, the Word of God

# Barth's Understanding of Election: Christ as the crux

- Barth's doctrine of election centers on Jesus Christ as both the subject and object of God's electing grace.
- Barth claims that God's election is not a predetermined choice between salvation and damnation *for individuals*.
- Election for Barth is fundamentally about God's self-revelation and self-giving in Jesus.
- Election is an expression of God's free grace, a divine initiative to reconcile all of humanity to God.

# Barth's Understanding of Election: Christ as the crux

- **Christ is the condemned one**, enduring rejection on behalf of us all in bearing our sins;
- **Christ is the elect one**, bringing justification and salvation to all people by his faithfulness to God.
- Through Christ's life, death, and resurrection, God says NO to all human sinfulness, and God says YES to all human beings.
- Barth writes: "[Christ] takes upon Himself the rejection of man with all its consequences, and elects man to participation in His own glory."

## Romans 5:12, 17 – 19

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned ... If, because of the one man's trespass, death reigned through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.

