

1. What is the purpose of this paper?

The relationship of God's sovereignty and man's ability to choose, and particularly how it relates to God's election of individuals for salvation, is a fascinating subject and one that has been debated for centuries. Has God given man the power to believe or reject the truth, and therefore have a part in determining his own eternal destiny? Do we have the freedom and ability to choose or reject Christ? Because of sin, has man lost the capacity to respond to God in faith? Does God unconditionally choose who will be saved (not based upon a consideration of their future faith and choice)? Does God, in His foreknowledge, look into the future and choose for salvation those whom He knows will believe in Christ of their own choice? These questions, and others like them, seem to have been constantly debated and are still being debated today, even within our own Association of Churches. Great Commission does not have a comprehensive statement or position relating to the various issues often discussed in Calvinism/Arminianism debates. Different pastors have differing convictions that are taught in Great Commission churches. And, in addressing this subject, I have no illusions that I will be able to solve the tensions inherent in this age-old debate. Perhaps part of the reason there is debate is that the Scriptures may not be crystal clear in resolving these issues. God is beyond us and His wisdom and ways are often beyond finding out. We should not be surprised if we cannot understand or synthesize everything He says about an issue. Yet on the other hand, we should not be afraid to try to understand more about God and to seek to grow in our knowledge of God, His Word and His ways. Rather than throw up our hands and say, "I can't understand because God is beyond me," let's pray for wisdom and humility, and continue to ask questions as we study the Scripture to learn as much as we possibly can about the mysteries of our awesome God. Having said this, I wanted to state the main purposes of this paper:

1. My goal is that pastors in our movement will emphasize in their teachings both biblical truths--that God is sovereign and that man has responsibility to respond to Him.
2. My second goal is to help build unity. There are a number of different views in our movement on, for example, the subject of election. The purpose of this paper is not to highlight one view over another. Instead, my hope is that the reader will recognize that there are a variety of respectable and reasonable explanations given by godly Christians on this subject. We believe that we can have different views on topics like this and still work effectively as a movement of churches to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world.

2. How will the subject be approached?

One approach to this subject would be to examine the history of theology as it relates to the issue. We could look at the teachings of various godly men, starting with the early church fathers, and proceeding to Augustine, Calvin, Luther, Arminius, Wesley, Finney, and others. And, although the study of the history of theology can be helpful and show us how various men have solved different

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theological problems, it also has dangers attached to it. We can easily become enamoured by our favorite theologian and put more stock in his teaching and arguments than in the Scripture itself. In some seminaries, the study of theology has primarily become the study of the history of theology and of how various men have interpreted Scripture without all that much study of the Scriptures themselves. I am reminded of an attorney friend who took a course in constitutional law—but never once were they required to read the constitution. The entire course focused on how the constitution has been interpreted, not what it actually says. Let's not make the same mistake when studying theology. Sure, it is helpful to read the works of others and their systematic theologies, but when we do, we must be ruthless in examining all teaching in the light of the Scripture and spend many times more effort studying the Bible itself than in studying writings about it. Please do the same with this paper.

Another way we could approach the subject would be to survey the various positions in Christianity today. In this way, we could determine the breadth of what is “orthodox” or traditionally taught within the Church. And we could say that as long as we stay within these parameters, we are within the realm of orthodoxy. But how do we know that what has become orthodox and traditional is not way off base, as it was in the days of Jesus? The religious community of His day rejected Him and His message largely because they held to their false traditions and preconceived ideas about God and Christ.

No, the only safe approach is to go back to the Scriptures themselves and that is what I will attempt to do in this paper. I have included lots of Scripture and have included it in the text so that, hopefully, you will actually read it and meditate on it. This has made the paper longer than it would be if I only included the references.

I will look at three topics that are often addressed in discussions about Calvinism and Arminianism: 1) God's sovereignty and man's ability to choose, 2) the extent of God's love, and 3) is election conditional or unconditional?

I believe that in each area, the Scripture teaches truths that are difficult, if not impossible, for the human mind to fully harmonize. For each topic, I will state what I see to be the contrasting truths and then share verses supporting each truth. For some of the topics, I will attempt to show how I feel they can be harmonized in light of these or other Scriptures.

In this paper, I do not have the space or time to look at the different ways Christians have attempted to harmonize these contrasting truths, or even to look at many of the different challenges to them. If you would like to study further in these areas, I would recommend the book *Christian Theology*, by Millard J. Erickson, Baker Book House. In this systematic theology, Erickson does a commendable job of presenting the most popular approaches as well as his own best understanding. Although I do not agree with all of his arguments and conclusions, I have found it to be a helpful resource that summarizes some of the ways Christians have attempted to grapple with various theological issues, including the ones I am addressing.

Another resource I would recommend is your fellow leaders. God has given leaders to one another to help guard and protect each other in both life and doctrine. So we should expect that, after the Scriptures, our fellow leaders will most likely be the next greatest source God will use to sharpen our theological understanding. So as you seek to develop convictions on this or other topics of Scripture, do so in discussion with your fellow leaders.

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As I look at these issues, I will not attempt to make a definitive statement on each. Indeed it appears to me that the Scriptures themselves are not crystal clear on many of them. In fact, on the issue of unconditional election (which many feel is the central issue delineating a Calvinist from an Arminian), the more I study, the less convinced I am that the Scripture makes a definitive statement. God did not give us the Bible in the form of a systematic theology and many issues are, frankly, just not that easy to prove one way or the other.

NOTE THIS CAREFULLY: This paper does not represent any "official" views of our Association, but my own views. But my hope and prayer is that God will use this to build a greater understanding and unity within the Association.

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3. How do sovereignty and man's ability to choose relate to the issues at hand?

The Scripture powerfully teaches two truths—God is sovereign and man has significant freedom of choice. Both are true and must be believed and taught. As humans, we may not understand how both can be true simultaneously, but if the Scriptures teach them to be true, we must accept them anyway.

Now a reconciliation of these two truths in a general sense will not solve the specific issue of whether God allows man a degree of freedom of choice in regard to his own salvation. However, I do hope to show that if God were to allow us to have such freedom, this would not threaten His sovereignty. I also hope to show from the Scriptures that some of God's desires can go unfulfilled and some of His purposes can be thwarted, and that this is not inconsistent with His sovereignty. Therefore, it may be possible for some to be lost that our sovereign God desires to save.

4. What is the nature of God's sovereignty?

God's sovereignty can be under-emphasized and diminished or it can be over-emphasized. One over-emphasis, or misunderstanding, is that sovereignty means that God can do absolutely anything conceivable. Another way of stating this is that God has no limits in regard to who He is or what He

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can do. But the Scripture never teaches this, and in fact teaches that God is limited in some ways and there are some things God cannot do.

“in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago”
(Titus 1:2).

“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone” (James 1:13, NIV).

God cannot do anything that is against His nature. He cannot lie. He cannot do evil or even be tempted by evil. Since He is always righteous, He cannot be unrighteous. Since He is always wise, He cannot make a mistake or act unwisely or foolishly. If He is always faithful, then He cannot be unfaithful.

So sovereignty does not mean that God can do absolutely anything or that He is unlimited in every way. Certainly He is not limited by any force or entity outside Himself. But He is limited by Himself, by who He is. If God is faithful, loving, truthful, and righteous, that limits what He can do, since He can do nothing that denies His own character.

Webster's Unabridged Dictionary defines the word “sovereign” as: “One who exercises supreme power; a supreme ruler, the person having the highest authority in a state, as a king, emperor, queen, etc.” This English meaning captures quite well the essence of the various Hebrew and Greek words that are translated “sovereign” in the Old and New Testaments. The various words typically mean to rule, govern, dominate, exercise authority, and have dominion. And the Scripture teaches that God has total and absolute ruling power over all His creation.

Genesis 14:18-22 — He is God Most High.

2 Chronicles 29:11 — His is the dominion and He exalts Himself as head over all.

Exodus 15:18 — The Lord will reign forever and ever.

Deuteronomy 4:39 — The Lord, He is God in Heaven above and on the earth below;
there is no other.

Certainly, God is Ruler over all with power to do “*whatever pleases Him*” (Psalm 115:3). Yet, a question can be asked, “How does God use His sovereignty?” Another way to ask this is, “What is His management style?” God could employ a very “hands-on,” “top-down” management style and originate or actively control every single event that occurs, making His creatures no more than robots. Or He could choose to use a more “hands off,” “inclusive” management style and at times listen to the opinions of His creatures and give them a degree of freedom to make their own decisions, even if those decisions are not according to His nature and desire.

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Perhaps one of the most surprising things in the Bible and in life is the extent to which God seems to use a “hands off,” “inclusive” management style. Amazingly, our all-knowing and all-powerful God appears in the pages of Scripture as extremely humble, often responding to our prayers, and often exercising extreme patience with people who mock Him and spit in His face and persecute, torture, and murder those He loves.

5. Has God delegated some of His ruling authority to men?

God's humility is seen in His willingness to delegate some of His ruling authority to men. From the beginning of creation, God appointed men to rule over the earth.

“And God blessed them; and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (Genesis 1:28, NIV, emphasis mine).

“You, O king (Nebuchadnezzar), are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; ³⁸ in your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all...” (Daniel 2:37-38, NIV, emphasis mine).

Clearly, the Scriptures teach that God has delegated some of His ruling authority to man. Certainly, He has not delegated His sovereignty, in the sense of “supreme power and authority,” but He has granted men a significant degree of power and authority to rule the earth and to make judgments and decisions concerning the world in which we live.

6. How does God's sovereignty relate to sin?

One of the most powerful proofs that God has given man the ability to make real choices is the fact that so much sin exists in the world and in the pages of the Bible. We know that sin never originates with God. It is an abomination to God and is never His will.

“Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong” (Habakkuk 1:13, NIV).

“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone” (James 1:13, NIV).

God cannot be tempted by sin, nor does He tempt anyone to sin. In fact, the very definition of sin is that which transgresses the law of God and so opposes the desire and will of God (1 John 3:4). So the existence of sin shows that God can have desires that go unfulfilled. That people should sin is

never His desire; it is just the opposite of His desire. He is grieved by sin (Ephesians 4:30-31) and it is an abomination to Him (Proverbs 6:16). Yet in spite of God’s hatred of sin, we see sin everywhere, both in today’s world and in the Bible.

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But if God is sovereign (ruler over all), then He is certainly able to stop all sin. And if He loves people and hates sin and oppression, why has He created a world in which sin and oppression are so prevalent? How can He allow all the atrocities to occur that do occur? It is certainly true that it is possible that God could create a world without sin. But it may not be possible for God to create a world where creatures have a genuine moral capacity and have that world be without sin, or at least without the potential for sin. Indeed, if a creature is not capable of disobedience, can it have a real moral capacity? Is love possible without the possibility of hate? Perhaps it is a higher priority of God to create creatures with a potential to sin and with the ability to love or to hate, than to have a world without sin, but filled with robots who have no real choice in the matter.

Genesis 6:5-6 is an example of how far God, in His sovereignty, has, at times, allowed sinful men to go.

“Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. ⁶ And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart” (Genesis 6:5-6).

Why would God grieve? Because men were not living as He had intended. God had not created man to end up in such a violent, despicable condition. And when He saw what man had done with the freedom that God had given him, God’s heart was grieved and He was sorry that He had ever created man and decided to destroy mankind with a world-wide flood.

“The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And he said to him, ‘I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to’” (Luke 4:5-6, NIV, emphasis mine).

How did the Devil get “authority” and “power” over the kingdoms of the world? I know of no place in the Bible where it says that God gave Satan this authority. But God gave man the authority to rule the earth, and when man rebelled against God, he became a slave to sin and effectively (perhaps not always consciously) gave this authority to the Devil.

It has been helpful to me to realize that God can apparently have two types of “will”—a prescriptive will and a decreed or firmly-decided will. His prescriptive will is revealed in His commands to men and never includes sin of any kind. His prescriptive will is not always followed by men, but His decreed will can never be thwarted. Apparently, God has priorities—certain things are more

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important and valuable to Him than others. He desires certain things to happen or not happen (certainly He never desires for sin to happen, or why would He forbid it?), yet it is evidently a higher priority to God to allow men a degree of freedom of choice than to prevent all sin. This in no way diminishes God's sovereignty, since He has absolute and total control over the amount of freedom He gives to men and the limits of that freedom. Not even one atom functions outside of His knowledge or ability to control. In the end, He will work all things out according to His sovereign plan and in line with His highest priorities, while normally still allowing men to be the originators of their own actions and allowing those actions to have real consequences. Things do not always work out according to His prescriptive will and desire, but whatever He allows to happen will only happen because it is ultimately acceptable to Him (even though He may not desire it and may even grieve about it).

But no one can thwart His firmly-decided plans and purposes:

"Yes, and from ancient days I am he. No one can deliver out of my hand. When I act, who can reverse it?" (Isaiah 43:13, NIV, emphasis mine).

"I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. ¹¹ From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose. What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do" (Isaiah 46:10-11, NIV, emphasis mine).

7. What are some other verses that indicate that God's prescriptive will can be thwarted and His desires unfulfilled?

The following verses further demonstrate that God has given mankind a degree of authority, and has given him the ability to make moral choices, even choices contrary to God's desire.

"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" (Acts 7:51, NASV).

"But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John" (Luke 7:30, NASV).

"Oh that My people would listen to Me, That Israel would walk in My ways! ¹⁴ I would quickly subdue their enemies, And turn My hand against their adversaries. ¹⁵ Those who hate the LORD would pretend obedience to Him; And their time of punishment would be forever. ¹⁶ But I would feed you with the finest of the wheat; And with honey from the rock I would satisfy you" (Psalms 81:13-16).

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling" (Matthew 23:37, emphasis mine).

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Other verses also show that God has given mankind a significant degree of ruling authority, and an ability to choose—even to the extent of radically rebelling against His desires. These include: Deuteronomy 5:29; Isaiah 30:15-18; Jeremiah 3:19-20; Isaiah 65:1-3; Hosea 6:4; Micah 2:1; Acts 14:16; Numbers 14:11; Jeremiah 31:2; Isaiah 5:1-7; Isaiah 66:3-4; as well as many others.

These verses we have looked at also indicate that man's choices of whether to obey or rebel affect God's willingness to save, to bless, and to protect those He cares for. Additionally, we see that God does have desires that can be unfulfilled and that His desires and purposes are, in fact, often thwarted by rebellious mankind.

8. If God has delegated some of His ruling authority to man, does this make man sovereign?

Does the idea that God allows humans to make moral choices that are contrary to His will nullify the sovereignty of God and make man sovereign (the supreme authority)? Not in the least. The fact that God has granted a degree of ruling authority to men does not decrease God's supreme authority whatsoever. He is the one who granted it, and He can withdraw it at any time or in any particular situation that He so chooses.

God puts limits on our power and ability to choose to do what we might want. For instance, men cannot choose the day of their birth, or seldom the day of their death. Men cannot choose the political or economic society that they are born into. No one can control the weather, or fully control his own health. And, ultimately, I am not free to take another breath unless God allows it. So, when we talk about "free will," we must realize that we are never totally free to do whatever we want whenever we want.

Neither are we free to choose something that we have no desire to choose. I don't like lima beans. This dislike affects my choice of foods, which seldom includes lima beans. Yet, this example is instructive. For if someone were to convince me that lima beans were absolutely essential to my health and well being, I would start to choose to eat them. Each of us has a system of values that we have developed through the reasoning process that God has given us. Sometimes we reason well and sometimes not so well. And sometimes our desires are so strong that they overcome our reason and we do things that we know aren't good for us, or that we really wish we wouldn't do. Paul found himself in this situation in Romans 7. Our Lord said that "*everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin*" (John 8:34). People become addicted to alcohol, drugs, food, and other things. We become slaves to certain desires and ways of thinking. Apart from the help of God, it is impossible for us to truly and inwardly change.

So, our "free will" is not as free as it may first appear. It is only as free as God allows through our circumstances, our health, our length of life, our talents and abilities, etc. And our freedom is very much affected by past choices we have made. And we are never free to avoid the consequences of

our actions. Every act will be brought into judgment.

In light of the significant freedom that God has given man to make his own choices, even to the point of rebellion, we might ask ourselves if God ever overrules man's choices. Some theologians emphasize man's ability to choose to the extent that it almost becomes the highest principle that God will not, or even cannot, violate. But we must remember that any ruling power or ability to choose for ourselves is only given and delegated to us by God. And the One who gives it can just as easily take it away.

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It would seem that every act of judgment is in some way stripping away from man his ability to make choices. The judgment of death certainly does this. No more choices can be made, at least in this world. Yet God can overrule men in ways other than snuffing out their life. He took away King Saul's freedom to choose by making him prophesy involuntarily (1 Samuel 19:19-24). He took away King Nebuchadnezzar's freedom to choose by taking away his sanity for several years (Daniel 4:32-34). In addition, God has powerful ways of influencing our choices. He used the words of the prophets to persuade His people. He used physical blessings or curses to correct them. He uses the witness of creation to speak to mankind (Romans 1), and He uses the witness of the Spirit (John 15:26). God can influence believer or unbeliever, as He did King Cyrus when He made him His "*shepherd*" to "*accomplish what I please*" (Isaiah 44:28), even though Cyrus did not acknowledge God (Isaiah 45:4).

God can even use the evil choices of men (which He does not originate or encourage) to further His purposes and accomplish His ends.

"Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. ²⁸ They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen" (Acts 4:27-28, NIV).

God did not instigate or inspire these men to do this evil, yet He used their evil choice as a part of His plan to bring salvation to the world.

9. But what about God's foreknowledge. If God already knows everything that will happen, doesn't that curtail our freedom of choice?

The Scripture teaches that God knows the future and knows it 100% accurately (Isaiah 41:22-23, Isaiah 46:10, Deuteronomy 18:18-22). So if God knows the future (for instance who will be saved and who won't) then the future is absolutely fixed and cannot be changed. So, seemingly, one of two things must be true. Either man has no true freedom of choice (since everything is already known and set in the mind of God) or God does not know the future choices of men (perhaps even

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God cannot know what is unknowable).

Of the various explanations given by theologians that allow for both the foreknowledge of God and the free choices of man, I personally favor the option that involves the concept found in the phrase “would have.” God does foreknow every choice of men, but if men were to choose differently than they do, God would have foreknown differently than He does. So the idea that God’s foreknowledge (although prior to man’s choices) is conditioned by those choices (as expressed by the words “would have”) is a concept that can help solve the tension between foreknowledge and free choice.

In actuality, the fact that God foreknows the future may not make the future any more unchangeable than it already is. For if we define the future as what will happen, then no one can change the future. By definition the future is set. It is what will be. And if it were to be any different than it is, then it would no longer be what will be. But the fact that no one can change the future does not mean that our choices don’t affect what the future will be. For if we were to choose differently than we do, the future would be different than it will be. So the fact that God knows the future would not seem to make it any more certain than it already is by definition. Neither does God’s foreknowledge in any way hinder or restrict man’s ability to make real choices. The only way God’s foreknowledge could restrict a man’s choice is if God were to decide to overrule that choice, which He has every right to do, and sometimes does do—yet not always.

For many people, a failure to solve this logical problem, this apparent tension between God’s foreknowledge and man’s ability to choose, has caused them to accept one of two errors. Some have denied or minimized the ability of man to choose and have adopted a fatalistic approach to life and faith. Others have denied that God has the ability to know the future “free” choices of men.¹ Neither extreme is right. Both are true—God has perfect foreknowledge and man has freedom to choose. We must accept both as true, since the Scriptures teach both.²

10. In summary, how do the issues of God’s sovereignty and man’s God-given ability to make real choices relate to the issue of salvation?

Very few people would argue against the idea that God has given men the ability to choose to sin and, in so doing, to violate His will and desires. God’s sovereignty is not threatened by His choice to allow men to make horrific choices that thwart His desires and bring grief to Him and to those He loves. Similarly, God’s sovereignty is not threatened or undermined if He should choose to allow men to have a say and a choice in accepting or rejecting God’s offer of salvation. Neither is His sovereignty threatened if some are lost that He loves and desires to save. All of these scenarios can be explained through the concept that God has priorities. In each case, His priority would be to give men the freedom to choose, even if that freedom results in a situation where all of His desires are not fulfilled. Ultimately, God’s highest priorities will always be fulfilled.

Hopefully my attempts to synthesize the truths of God’s sovereignty and man’s ability to make real

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choices have been helpful. However, none of this proves that God gives men a choice in their salvation, but only that if He should do so, it would not undermine His sovereignty. He can give men whatever freedom He wants to give them. Similarly, He can restrict men's freedom, should He so desire. Thus, God could give men the freedom and ability to accept or reject salvation when it is offered, but not give them the freedom to reject salvation once it is obtained. Just because God gives men freedom in one area of choice does not necessarily mean that He will give freedom in another possible area of choice. How do we know in which areas we have freedom to choose? The Scriptures must be our guide.

The Extent of God's Love

11. What is the extent of God's love and how does it relate to those He chooses for salvation?

Does God love all men, or does He love only the elect? Does God desire that all men be saved, or only the elect? Again, I believe that the Scriptures powerfully and clearly teach two truths—God loves all men and desires that all be saved, and yet some men will be damned by God and will experience His fierce wrath for all eternity. As with God's sovereignty, numerous honest attempts have been made to explain the extent of God's love and its characteristics toward those who are saved, those who will be saved, and those who will be damned. Some try to show that God's love and desire to save extends only to the elect. Others would extend God's love even toward the wicked, denying the existence of Hell. What I hope to show in this section is that God's love and desire to save extends to all men and yet those who refuse to repent and believe forfeit His love and will be actively judged by God in a place of eternal torment.

12. Does God love all men?

Let's look now at several verses concerning the extent of God's love.

⁹“The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. ¹⁰ All you have made will praise you, O LORD; your saints will extol you. ¹¹ They will tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might, ¹² so that all men may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. ¹³ Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations. The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made. ¹⁴ The LORD upholds all those who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down. ¹⁵ The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. ¹⁶ You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing. ¹⁷ The LORD is righteous in all his ways and loving toward all he has made”
(Psalms 145:9-17, NIV, emphasis mine).

This psalm of David states that God's love extends to "*all he has made*." He has compassion on "*all he has made*." He is good to "*all he has made*." One way He shows this love is by giving food and satisfying the desires of "*every living thing*" (possibly including animals as well). Now, a persuasive argument can be made that the word "*all*" here is being used in the sense of the "*vast majority*," as it is sometimes used elsewhere. He satisfies the desires of every living thing, yet it is undeniable that some men starve to death. Not all humans are upheld when they fall or lifted up when they are bowed down. So, it would seem that this passage is speaking of a love or benevolence of God to His creatures in general and is not saying that there are no exceptions to God's provision and care.

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• "Why should we love our
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"But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:44-48, NIV).

Why should we love our enemies, according to Jesus? Because our heavenly Father loves His enemies. We are to follow His example. He causes the sun to rise and sends rain upon not only the righteous, but the wicked. Certainly He sends rain on both the elect and the non-elect, implying that He loves them both.

"Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. ¹⁶ In the past, he let all nations go their own way. ¹⁷ Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy" (Acts 14:15-17, NIV).

Paul, preaching to these idolaters, points out God's kindness and care for them.

"Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. ³ So when you, a mere man, pass judgement on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? ⁴ Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you towards repentance? ⁵ But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed" (Romans 2:2-5, NIV).

God shows kindness, tolerance, and patience toward the wicked. His goal in doing so is to lead them to repentance. However, that does not mean that He is not angry toward unrepentant sinners.

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Yet His anger is not always immediately revealed, but is stored up for the day of God's wrath. Apparently, God is able to hold both wrath and love within himself toward a person—the enemies of God are under His wrath, but He also loves them and desires them to repent.

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God” (John 3:14-21, NIV).

John 3:16, on a casual reading, would seem to show that God loves the entire world, meaning all of humanity. However, some Bible students have tried to limit the interpretation of the word “world” to mean “those who will believe” or “the elect.” I'd like to give several arguments showing that, in this passage, it refers to the whole of humanity—believers and unbelievers, elect and non-elect alike.

The Greek word translated “world” is the word Kosmos. *Vines Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* and Kittel's *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume* give the following meanings to the word:

Adornment — used with this meaning only once in the New Testament in 1 Peter 3:3

The Universe — everything that has been created

The Earth

Humanity

The Gentile nations as distinguished from the Jews

This age, or unredeemed creation in its present state of alienation and opposition to God

The sum of all material possessions

Nowhere is the word used in a context that requires or even implies the interpretation “elect” as opposed to non-elect. Neither is the word ever with certainty used to describe believers as opposed to non-believers. Certainly it is used to describe the non-believing world as opposed to believers, but not the other way around.³

But not only does the lexical meaning of the word argue against the meaning “elect,” John 3:16 itself, and its context, point to the interpretation “humanity” or “the human race” and not “the elect.”

Throughout the passage, believing is a condition of salvation. God gave His Son and sent Him into the world as the light of the world to save the world. But there is a condition—men must believe. Some do and come to the light. Some hate the light and won't come to the light. Salvation is not automatic with the giving and coming of the Son. A response of faith is required. This is seen as well

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in verses 14-15. It wasn't enough that Moses lifted up the bronze snake in the wilderness. The Israelites had to look at the snake before they were healed of the poisonous bites. For them, looking was a condition of healing. Similarly, believing in Jesus is a condition of salvation.

Having said this, it is obvious that those who believe are a subset of the "world."

If we take another look at verses 18-21, and use parenthesis to remind ourselves of the context, it becomes apparent that the term "world" refers to the whole of humanity and not to the elect only.

"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever (of those in the world) believes in him (who has come into the world) is not condemned, but whoever (of those in the world) does not believe (in Him who has come into the world) stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men (in the world who behold this light) loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light (which is in the world), and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever (of those in the world beholding the light) lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

By reminding ourselves of the context, it becomes apparent that we cannot ascribe the meaning "elect" to the word "world" in John 3:16—for it makes no sense that some of the elect would believe and some not believe and be condemned. Nor does it make sense that some of the elect would come to the light and some hate the light and be judged. Nor does it work that the Son came into the elect, for He did not come into the elect but into the world of men, elect and non-elect alike.

In conclusion, it seems apparent that it was God's love for the "world" (humanity—elect and non-elect alike) that motivated Him to send His Son to be our Savior.

13. Does God desire all to be saved?

Several verses seem to indicate that God desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.

"I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone— ²for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. ³ This is good, and pleases God our Savior, ⁴ who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. ⁵ For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time" (1 Timothy 2:1-6, NIV).

Again, on a casual reading, this passage seems to say that God desires all men to be saved and that Jesus, being the only mediator between God and man, gave Himself as a ransom for all men. Nothing in the passage suggests that the word “all” is being used in the sense of the “vast majority.”⁴ But even if the sense of “all” could be shown to mean the “vast majority,” still the passage could not be interpreted to mean that God only desires to save the elect. For the elect are not the vast majority since “only a few” find the narrow gate (Matthew 7:13-14).

• • • • •
• “God’s love extends to all •
• and His desire to save •
• extends to all.” •
• • • • •

Some have argued that the word “all” does not mean every individual, but all different classes of men—male and female, ruler and subject, young and old, Jew and Gentile. And, indeed, it could conceivably be argued that this sense of “all types of men” could be in view, since he speaks specifically of praying for those in authority. Perhaps he is saying that God even desires the salvation of rulers (one particular class of men). But even if “all” is referring to “all classes of men,” still this would not limit God’s desire to the elect only. For if God desires all classes of men to be saved, that would include all individuals in those classes. To say that God’s desire for peoples’ salvation extends only to the elect, it must be argued that “all” means “all classes and not all individuals within those classes.”

But the word “all” seldom, if ever, has this meaning. And if it does, it is only when the context or the plain sense of the subject at hand demands it.⁵ But nothing in the context of this passage demands or even implies such a use of the word “all”.

Note that the phrase “all men” is used three times in the passage. First, in the command that prayers be made for “everyone” (literally “all men”). Secondly, in the statement that God wants “all men” to be saved. And thirdly, in the statement that Christ gave Himself as a ransom for all men.⁶ Now look at the first instance. Is Paul commanding us to pray for only some of all the types of men? No! Clearly he is commanding the church to pray for all men, at least for all that they know or are aware of. For how would we know who to pray for and who not to pray for within each class of men? And then Paul specifically emphasizes prayer for one class of men “kings and those in authority.” Are we to pray for only some within this class? Of course not! Clearly in the first use of the words “all men,” the word “all” cannot mean some and not others of all classes of men. And if this is true in the first instance, it would seem that it would be true in the others as well.

1 Timothy 2:1-6 is an extremely powerful statement that God “wants,” “desires (NASB),” or “wills” (KJV) all men to be saved. As far as I can see, there’s just no way of honestly getting around this verse. God’s love extends to all and His desire to save extends to all.

“But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance...¹⁵ Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave

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him” (2 Peter 3:8-9, 15, NIV).

This passage again talks about how God is not “wanting,” “wishing (NASB),” or “willing (KJV)” for anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. Peter says that this is the reason that Christ’s return and the judgment day have not come sooner. God doesn’t want some people to perish in judgment. God’s patience (in not sending His Son more quickly) is resulting in salvation for many. Now, do the words “anyone” and “everyone” refer to all people? Or do they refer only to the elect, or those God calls? On face value, Peter appears to be referring to all people. The concept of who are elect, or called, is nowhere in view in the context of these verses. So the most normal interpretation would be to regard this as a desire of God toward all people.

A few other verses that show God’s love for all and desire to save all are: Ezekiel 18:23, 33:11; Lamantations 3:32-33; Jeremiah 48:30-32; John 4:8.

14. How does God’s love for unbelievers compare to His love for believers?

While these, and other verses, indicate that God loves the world and has a desire to save all men, a clear distinction is seen between His love for unbelievers and His love for those who are saved. None of the verses describing God’s love for the world and desire to save all men come even close to the descriptions of His love for those who have believed. His love for believers, as described in passages such as Romans 8 and Ephesians 1, appears to be at a whole different level and intensity than the love that He shows to all men. Paul says in Ephesians 3:14-19 that God’s love for believers is so long, wide, high and deep that it is beyond comprehension.

Also, unbelievers—both those who will someday be saved and those who will never be saved—are described in the Scriptures as being under the wrath of God. And in some ways, God’s wrath toward unbelievers is currently being revealed:

“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Romans 1:18, NIV).

God’s wrath toward unbelievers is being revealed (present tense) as He releases them to their rebellion and gives them over to further depravity. Thus, they receive the natural consequences of their rebellion. Both those who will one day be saved and those who will never be saved experience this wrath. But in a coming day, the full intensity of God’s wrath will be revealed against those who do not repent:

“But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed” (Romans 2:5, NIV).

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Other aspects of God's wrath are not immediately revealed, but are stored up against unbelievers. But when a person believes, God's wrath is appeased. The storehouse is emptied. Believers no longer have the threat of God's fierce wrath hanging over their heads.

"Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!" (Romans 5:9, NIV).

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1, NIV).

Predestination and Election

15. Did God predestine some people to be saved before the creation of the world?

Did God choose His elect before the foundation of the world? Did He predestine some to go to Heaven and others to go to Hell? If He did predestine, on what basis did He choose? Was His choice arbitrary? Do we know His reasons for choosing some and not others? Does He call all people to salvation or only some?

Here again, I believe there are two truths that must be taught. On the one side, I understand the Scriptures to say that God has predestined people before the foundation of the world and on the other hand, Scripture depicts that salvation is available to all.

Several verses speak of God's predestination.

"For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves" (Ephesians 1:4-6, NIV).

In this passage in Ephesians, Paul is listing off a series of blessings that God has given us in Christ. Verses 4-6 talk about the Father's intention of choosing believers before the creation of the world.

One way that some Bible students attempt to reconcile predestination with God's universal call to all men to repent and believe is to view God's predestination as a corporate election "in Christ" and not a predestination of specific individuals. Ephesians 1:4 says that we were chosen "*in him*." According to this view, Christ was chosen before the creation of the world, but at the same time, God also made the choice to make "*holy and blameless*" all who attach themselves, through faith, to Christ.

One argument that gives this idea some force is the number of times the concept of "*in him*," or "*in Christ*" is used in Ephesians. Clearly, Paul is seeking to make a point that all of a believer's blessings are found "*in Christ*." So perhaps even our predestination is through our unity with Christ.

On the other hand, others would argue that this verse is referring to the election of individuals, primarily because of verse five, which parallels verse four. Verse five says that God predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ. The word “sons” is plural and it would seem odd to talk of the church corporately (singular) being “adopted as sons” (plural).

Another verse that would seem to teach an election of specific individuals is Romans 11:7:

“What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened” (Romans 11:7, NIV).

Israel was earnestly seeking righteousness and salvation (Romans 9:30-10:2). But, most of Israel didn’t achieve it; only the “elect” (chosen) did. This verse seems to be referring to individuals within the nation of Israel who were elected to salvation.⁷

Another passage that talks about predestination is Romans 8:

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified” (Romans 8:28-30, NIV).

This passage introduces a section of Scripture that is one of the most powerfully encouraging and comforting passages in the Bible. In the verses following this passage, Paul asks and answers seven questions that irrefutably affirm the unshakable security we have as believers, since we know that God is for us. Verse 28 takes us back to the very beginning—God had a purpose. And that purpose was to call some people to be His own, who would love Him.

First of all, God foreknew us. This literally means to “know beforehand,” yet in some places the word can imply not only to know beforehand but also to choose beforehand. But either way, God certainly knew these people beforehand, all their thoughts, all their actions, all their sins, all their failures and successes, and yet He chose them—predestined them to become just like His Son and brothers of His Son. So, the destiny of those who are foreknown is predestined or predetermined. They will be conformed to the likeness of His Son. Now, it is apparent that all who are foreknown are predestined, since God, in His omniscience, could not make a mistake in His foreknowledge. And those He predestined, He called. (This would seem to indicate an “effectual call” to salvation; i.e., all who are called in this way will be saved.) Again, it seems to be that all who were predestined were called, since it says “those,” implying all. And indeed, if any fall out of the picture at any of these steps, would we not have to say that God made a mistake in His predestining? For being

“(Romans 8:28) takes us back to the very beginning—God had a purpose. And that purpose was to call some people to be His own, who would love Him.”

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called and justified and glorified are but steps in the process of becoming like His Son. If anyone falls out of the original foreknown and predestined group, the goal they were predestined for is not accomplished and God must have made a mistake in His foreknowledge or predestination—which, of course, can not happen.

These verses indicate that before we are justified (which occurs when we believe in Christ), we have already been foreknown, predestined, and called. The calling is most likely the same as the calling that Paul talks about in other epistles, that occurs immediately before or at salvation. And the predestining is, most likely, the same as that referred to in Ephesians 1 that occurred before the creation of the world.

16. Do the Scriptures also teach a universal call or invitation to salvation?

Although the Scriptures teach that we are foreknown, predestined, and called prior to our salvation, they also teach that God invites all to come and be saved. Although the Scriptures seem to teach that God gives those who become believers a special call that He doesn't give others,⁸ it also teaches a broader, more universal call.

“For many are called, but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:14, NIV).

Here, the word “called” has the meaning of “invited.” Other Scriptures also indicate that God offers a broad, open invitation to all:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”
(Matthew 11:28, NIV).

“In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30, NIV).

“Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other”
(Isaiah 45:22, NIV).

“As the Scripture says, ‘Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’¹² For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him,¹³ for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” (Romans 10:11-13, NIV).

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

17. Does God choose those He knows will believe?

Some Bible students have attempted to reconcile the truths that God elects some before the foundation of the world and the truth that He invites and calls all men by appealing to God's foreknowledge. God, in His foreknowledge, looked ahead and elected for salvation those He knew would believe in Christ. Thus, He can sincerely and honestly invite all, yet choose some in advance that He knows will respond to His universal invitation. And Romans 8:39 does talk about God's foreknowledge prior to His predestination. Another passage that talks about foreknowledge prior to election is 1 Peter 1:1-2.

“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, ² who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance” (1 Peter 1:1-2, NIV).

This verse does seem to indicate that God's foreknowledge was, in some way, involved in His decision of who to elect for salvation. Yet the fact that foreknowledge is involved is obvious. To choose someone, you have to at least foreknow that they will exist. But, of course, God knows not only who will exist, but every single detail about them—their character, motives, thoughts, words, actions, every hair on their head, etc. So the question is not whether God's foreknowledge of the future is involved in His choice, but what things in a person's life (if any other than his existence) does God consider when making His choice. 1 Peter 1 simply doesn't address this question, although an argument could be made that it implies that God considered more in His foreknowledge than simply the person's existence. The statement that He chose “according to” His foreknowledge might imply that His choice was based in some way upon that foreknowledge. Yet, even if this is true, the things God may have considered are not spelled out.

18. Do the Scriptures tell us the basis for God's election?

First of all, the Scriptures nowhere state that God's election of individuals for salvation is arbitrary. “Arbitrary” means “without good or sufficient reason.” Certainly God has good and sufficient reasons for choosing those that He chooses. God does not flip a coin or select a certain percentage of people without reasons for His choice. In many places, the Scriptures teach that God does not show favoritism or partiality (Romans 2:11, Ephesians 6:9, Colossians 3:25). God does not favor a person based on their family background or economic status or nationality or race or sex.. He has good and sufficient reasons for His choices.

So, the issue is not whether God has good and sufficient reasons for His choice, but whether He has revealed His reasons to us. What do we know about why God chooses some and not others? One thing we know is that God's election is unconditional, at least in the sense of being unearned and unmerited. Evangelicals of both the Calvinist and Arminian persuasion agree on this. No one has

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ever earned or can ever earn God's favor and salvation because of a righteous life or through good works. Romans 9:11-16 in particular seems to teach that God's election does not depend on anything "good or bad" that men have done, nor upon their "works," "desire," or "effort." In light of the Scripture's many and clear statements that salvation is a gift of God that is unmerited and undeserved and not gained by good works or self-righteousness, it should not surprise us that God's election of individuals would not be based on their good works. Yet the crux of the issue seems to be whether God's election is unconditional in the sense that God's choice is not based on anything commendable in the individual chosen, including a voluntary response of faith or a decision to accept the gospel.

A key passage on this question is Romans 9.

"And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; ¹¹ for though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, ¹² it was said to her, 'The older will serve the younger.' ¹³ Just as it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.' ¹⁴ What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! ¹⁵ For He says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' ¹⁶ So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. ¹⁷ For the Scripture 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.' ¹⁸ So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. ¹⁹ You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?' ²⁰ On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it? ²¹ Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use? ²² What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? ²³ And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, ²⁴ even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles" (Romans 9:10-24).

Several aspects of this passage seem to argue quite strongly that God's election is unconditional and not related to any meritorious action, including faith. One is that God chose Jacob and not Esau before they were born. And verse eleven seems to say that God did not choose them on the basis of foreknowledge of their future actions, whether "good" or "bad." The fact that Paul makes a point that the God's choice did not take their future "good" or "bad" actions into account argues for total unconditional election. All their future choices (including faith) seem to be absent as far as reasons for God's choice.

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Another argument is that God has mercy on some and He hardens some. Hardening would seem to include more than just hardening someone against doing good, but also hardening them in regard to faith and repentance.

Another argument is the force of the objection that Paul answers—"Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" The objection seems to come from the heart of a person who understands that he has no choice in the matter. Yet Paul doesn't soften his statement, but responds that, as Creator, God can do whatever He wants with His creatures.

Some have tried to avoid the force of these arguments by claiming that the passage is not speaking of the election of individuals to salvation, but of the election of nations for special service to God. And, at least some portions of the passage do seem to refer to a corporate election rather than to individual election. The election of Jacob and not Esau seems to be referring to God's selection of Jacob and his descendants—rather than his brother Esau and his descendants—as God's covenant people. Paul quotes, *"The older will serve the younger,"* yet, Esau never did serve Jacob in the brothers' lifetime—but Esau's descendants did serve Jacob's descendants. Also, the verse *"Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated,"* was spoken by the prophet Malachi, well over a thousand years after their death. In Malachi, it is referring to how God favored the nation of Israel (Jacob's descendants) and judged the nation of Edom (Esau's descendants).

Also, Romans 11:28-29 (which is still part of Paul's three-chapter treatise on God's rejection of the Jews) indicates that even the Jews that God rejected in regard to their personal election are still elect as far as God's continuing purpose for the Jewish nation:

"As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, ²⁹ for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable" (Romans 11:28-29, NIV).

Yet, even though corporate election is in view in some parts of Paul's treatise, individual election for personal salvation seems to be in view in others. In Romans 9:24, Paul talks about God making known the *"riches of His glory"* upon some whom He *"called, not from Jews only, but also from among Gentiles."*

"What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory— ²⁴ even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?" (Romans 9:23-24, NIV).

The corporate election of Israel for service is not in view here, but God's calling (choosing) for salvation some individuals from among Jews and Gentiles.

So, both corporate and individual aspects of election seem to be in view in Romans 9-11. Paul seems to be giving some truths concerning God's election in relation to both nations for service and individuals for salvation. He draws principles from the Old Testament example of Jacob and Esau

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and of Pharaoh to reveal truth about the way God elects, whether nations or individuals.

But when trying to understand Romans 9, we must not forget Paul's overall goal in these chapters. In Romans 9-11, Paul is addressing the issue of why God has, by and large, rejected His people, the Jews, while saving thousands of Gentiles. And, if we keep Paul's overall objective in mind, it can lead us to a different possible explanation of what Paul is saying in regard to unconditional election.

Think with me for a moment about the force of the issue Paul is addressing. Here were the Jews—who had great advantages because of their religious heritage (9:4-5), were seeking righteousness (9:31), were zealous for God (10:2), and earnestly sought salvation (11:7). Now contrast these Jews with the Gentiles—whose religious heritage was detestable idolatry (1 Thessalonians 1:9), who were not pursuing righteousness (Romans 9:30), and who were given to all kinds of wickedness—sexual immorality, homosexuality, stealing, drunkenness, orgies, carousing, etc. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11 & 1 Peter 4:3-4). Surely it seems unjust that God would choose the godless, despicable Gentiles for salvation and pass over His own people, who had His special promises and were zealous in their desire to seek and serve Him.

With this overall issue in view, this passage in Romans 9 could possibly be seen primarily as Paul's attempt to show several things:

- 1) That God, as Creator, has the right to choose people on whatever basis He chooses and that we have no right to question His choices. He can choose whom He wants and harden whom He wants for whatever reasons He wants. God will have mercy on whom He has mercy.
- 2) That God's choice is not based on an individual's good deeds and righteousness or lack of good deeds and righteousness. It is God's "*purpose according to His choice*" that is the deciding factor, not anyone's "*works*" (9:11). It does not depend on "*the man who wills or the man who runs*," but on God who has mercy (9:16). Paul may be simply arguing that God is not compelled to choose someone just because they have a zeal for God or they have a desire for righteousness or they do good works. God owes salvation to no one, even His own people who had His promises, were zealous for Him, and were zealous for righteousness.

As we have seen, Romans 9 may imply, and even very strongly imply, that God chooses unconditionally, not taking into account anything commendable in the individual. But an argument can be made that it does not specifically state this. The words describing the unconditional nature of God's election say that it does not depend on the man who "wills," or the man who "runs." Jacob was chosen not because of "works" or because of the "good" or "bad" he would do. Paul does not specifically state that a voluntary response of faith or an attitude of humility are excluded as possible factors behind God's election.

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Now, the question can be asked, "Does Paul anywhere in his treatise give a reason why God rejected the Jews and chose the Gentiles?" Romans 9:30-32 may give some insight.

"What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; ³¹ but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. ³² Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works..." (Romans 9:30-32).

Here, Paul seems to give a "why" concerning the issue at hand—why God rejected most of the Jews and chose many Gentiles. The Jews did not attain their goal of righteousness because they pursued it as though it were by works, not by faith. They went about it in the wrong way. They sought to establish their own righteousness and did not submit to God's righteousness found in Christ (10:3-4).

Now, this passage does not specifically state that God, in His decision to reject many of the Jews, took into consideration their wrong approach and their lack of submitting to God's righteousness in Christ. But it does state the reason "why" they did not achieve the righteousness they pursued. Thus these verses would seem to imply that this could have been a factor in God's choice to reject them.

Here is another verse that may give some insight into why God rejected most of the Jews.

"You will say then, 'Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.' ²⁰ Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. ²² Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off" (Romans 11:19-22, NIV).

The "natural branches" that were broken off were Jews, who, although part of the "olive tree" and rich heritage of Israel, did not achieve salvation, but became enemies of the gospel (11:28). Although they were still a part of physical Israel (now apostate) they were not a part of spiritual Israel. Why were they broken off? *"Because of unbelief."* Here again we see a reason for their rejection. But notice who it was who broke off the branches. God did it. The passage appears to give a reason why God broke them off. He broke them off *"because"* of their unbelief.

Again, this passage does not specifically use the word "elect," nor does it specifically state "God looked at their unbelief in His decision not to elect them." It simply says that God *"did not spare"* them and that they were *"broken off"* because of *"unbelief."*

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In summary, I have trouble finding fully conclusive arguments or verses concerning God's reasons for electing some and not others. To me, the Scriptural evidence for unconditional election is inconclusive, as is the evidence for election based on foreknowledge of faith. Perhaps this is one reason that the issue has been debated for so long. Perhaps we need to allow the reasons for God's election to remain in the area of mystery and simply trust that God in His love, justice, and wisdom can make such choices much more adequately than we could ever imagine.

19. How do these issues relate to sharing the gospel?

The fact that God does elect people to salvation does not negate the truth that we are to be active in the sharing of the gospel. There is no question that men are exhorted and commanded to have faith in God. And, as communicators of the gospel, we should not hesitate to urge ones to come to Christ.

But don't those who teach that faith is a voluntary response of the human heart put a tremendous responsibility on the evangelist, since his preaching or effectiveness in sharing the gospel would be extremely important in encouraging someone to believe? Those who believe this should remember that the evangelist never has the primary responsibility for anyone's salvation. The working and drawing of God are the primary factors, not the efforts or wisdom of the evangelist. Since Christ has been lifted up, He is drawing "*all men*" to Himself (John 12:32). The Holy Spirit is convicting the world concerning "*sin, righteousness, and judgment*" (John 16:8). And if we are unfaithful, or fail to speak gracefully or winsomely, God can raise up others to reach that person.

But, on the other hand, don't those who teach unconditional election and that faith is entirely a gift of God diminish people's motivation to share the gospel, since, to them, salvation is entirely of the Lord? Those who believe this must remember that preaching is necessary for Paul says, "*how will they hear without a preacher*" (Romans 10:14). Our efforts to preach the gospel and the way we live our lives before others do make a difference. They are part of the means God uses to save people. Thus Paul made himself a slave to all in order to win as many as possible, adapting his actions and approach as much as he righteously could in order to attract as many people as possible to Christ (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). Paul commanded believers to live in such a way as to make the teaching about the Savior attractive and not to let their actions allow people to speak against the Word of God (Titus 2:5 & 9). And he exhorted believers to speak in a way that their words would have the greatest affect upon "*outsiders*" (Colossians 4:6). Clearly, our efforts to reach people for Christ in as winsome a way as possible are important, are necessary, are commanded, and are pleasing to God. Yet they are never the primary factors in anyone's salvation.

20. *How can these verses and arguments be summarized to provide us with some sideboards on this issue.*

Below are some summary statements that may, perhaps, be a help in avoiding extremes in these issues.

God's sovereignty is not threatened if He allows men the freedom of choice, even the freedom to choose their own eternal destiny.

Man's ability to choose is not threatened or nullified by God's foreknowledge.

God can allow His desires, intentions, and will to be thwarted at times by men.

God's firmly-decided decrees can never be thwarted.

God can work in such a way as to use even the sins of men to accomplish His purposes.

God loves (desires good for) every human being, "*all He has made.*"

God desires all men to be saved, elect and non-elect.

God chose individuals for salvation before the foundation of the world and predestined them to become like Christ.

God's election of individuals is not arbitrary (without good and sufficient reason) and God shows partiality to none.

It is hard to prove conclusively from the Bible that God's election of individuals for salvation is totally unconditional (in the sense that God considered nothing commendable in the ones elected) or that God's election is based upon His foreknowledge of faith in Christ or a willingness to believe.

God's election of individuals for salvation is not determined by the individual's good works, desire for God, desire for salvation, or religious piety.

No one can earn salvation, and God owes it to none.

While there seems to be an "effectual calling," where all who are called respond, God also calls in another sense (invites) all men to Himself.

Preachers of the gospel do not have the primary responsibility for anyone's salvation.

Preachers are necessary and preaching is important and does make a difference. Making the gospel attractive by our actions and by seeking to avoid offense is important and can make a difference.

21. *Final thoughts*

In conclusion, I would like to stress again that the thoughts in this paper do not represent the opinions of the Association as a whole, but my own opinions. Hopefully, they can help stimulate discussion that may lead to a better understanding of God and His ways and perhaps, as a result of this discussion, help us avoid certain unbiblical extremes.

Many Scriptural truths can appear to be contradictory to the human mind. And the challenge of attempting to reconcile seemingly contradictory truths can be exciting and rewarding. Such efforts

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can lead us to deeper understanding of God and His ways. Yet we must be cautious not to adopt any “system” that purports to answer all the questions of the mysteries of God. Furthermore, we must not fudge on our interpretation of Scripture or deny one aspect of truth because we don’t understand how it can be reconciled with another truth. It is much wiser and safer to say, “I don’t know how they fit together,” than to try to force the Scripture to fit a particular mold.

FOOTNOTES:

¹ There are currently a growing number of evangelicals (or perhaps former evangelicals), including Clark Pinnock, who are embracing an “open view of God” or “responsibility theism” and arguing that God cannot know the future free choices of men. For an excellent response defending God’s foreknowledge, see John Piper’s article, “Is the Glory of God at Stake in God’s Foreknowledge of Human Choices?” If you would like a copy of Piper’s article, e-mail me at dave@stonebrook.org and I will send it to you.

² For sake of time and space, I have not given Scriptural proofs of God’s foreknowledge. The article mentioned in the previous footnote does so quite adequately.

³ A few uses of the word “world” may imply that it is referring to believers only, but such an interpretation must come from a doctrinal assumption, not a requirement of the context. For example, John 1:20 says, “*The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’*” A doctrinal argument could be made that John is referring to believers only, since Jesus does not take away the sins of those who do not believe. However, nothing in the context of the passage linguistically or syntactically requires or even suggests this meaning. John could be saying that this Lamb had come with the purpose of taking away the sin of the world, not that he actually does take away the sin of the entire world.

⁴ The command to pray for “*everyone*” would most likely be referring to everyone the reader knows (including kings). But, even here, the word “*all*” would mean “all that you know” and not “the vast majority of those you know”.

⁵ The constraints of this paper prevent me from going into a thorough study of the use of the word “all”. But I am convinced from my study that the word is seldom, if ever, used to describe some and not others of every class. If you have examples otherwise, please e-mail them to me at dave@stonebrook.org and I will be glad to look them over and respond.

⁶ In this third instance, the word “men” is implied as the noun that the word “all” modifies. “All” refers back to the word “men” in verse six, where Christ is the mediator between God and men.

⁷ Other verses that would seem to indicate an election of individuals are 2 Timothy 2:8-10, Romans 8:28-29, and possibly Revelation 13:8.

⁸ Other verses teaching a special call for believers include: 1 Corinthians 1:22-27; Acts 2:38-40; Romans 1:5-7, 9:12,22-24; Acts 13:48; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14; Hebrews 3:1, 9:15; 2 Peter 1:10; Jude 1; and Revelations 17:14.

