

The Predestination Debate

A Harmony of Corporate Election and Individual Election

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### Abstract

The topic of predestination has been discussed throughout church history in the work of men like Augustine, Pelagius, Calvin, Arminius, and Barth. Corporate election seeks to reconcile some problematic areas of Calvinistic and Arminian theology by arguing that in the same way that God chose the nation of Israel through His election of Abraham, so He also chose the Church through His election of Jesus Christ. Despite this view's seemingly convincing evidence, Scripture points far beyond its main tenets. God's unconditional election of individuals ought to be foundational to the understanding of corporate election. This study will discuss and interact with the arguments for both corporate election and individual election in order to present an accord between the two views.

## The Predestination Debate

### A Harmony of Corporate Election and Individual Election

#### **Introduction**

The topic of predestination is one of the most hotly debated issues in all of Christendom. Scripture explains that God has elected all believers unto salvation, but its discussion of predestination is open to a lot of interpretation. The two main perspectives on this topic (those of the Calvinists and the Arminians) differ on the extent of the conditionality of God's election. Corporate election is one view that is often overlooked, although its evidence has some biblical foundation. Corporate election particularly seeks to find the balance of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Proponents of corporate election assert that God elected one individual, Jesus Christ, and those who are in Him, i.e., the Church, are also considered to be God's elect. Although many aspects of the arguments for corporate election are compelling, the system fails to properly address all aspects of election. Therefore, corporate election ought to be understood based on individual election as the foundation on which some of its main tenets exist, allowing corporate election and individual election to be true simultaneously.

The historical background of the predestination debate should first be considered. Augustine of Hippo (354-430), an early church father, sought to explain the doctrine of predestination. In his study of Scripture, he came to recognize that because of the sin of Adam, man is unable to choose to do any good work, i.e., he is entirely sinful and not righteous by God's standards.<sup>1</sup> An understanding of man's depravity molded Augustine's view of predestination. Because man is so sinful, he is only able to do good by God's

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1. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. M. Dods, G. Wilson, and J. J. Smith, in *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, ed. Whitney J. Oats (New York: Random House Publishers, 1948), 14.2, 241.

grace. Therefore, God elects certain individuals to believe in Christ and receive salvation, which ultimately leads to man's ability to perform good works. An Augustinian understanding of predestination may seem to restrict the free will of man. Despite this, Augustine argued that God's grace works in accordance with the respective wills of individuals.<sup>2</sup> This means that man's choice to do good or bad is still a free one. According to Augustine, these choices still happen according to God's will because of His sovereignty.<sup>3</sup>

One of Augustine's contemporaries, a moralist named Pelagius (354-420), opposed some of Augustine's ideas. Because of Pelagius' background as a moralist, he particularly felt that man always has the free will to choose to perform good deeds. Over the years, many considered the Augustinian and Pelagian views. In 431, at the Council of Ephesus, all of the issues were discussed and examined. What resulted from this council was a form of semi-Pelagianism that emphasized synergism (the cooperative work between God and man in salvation).<sup>4</sup> In 529, though, the Synod of Orange addressed the various issues surrounding semi-Pelagianism. The synod emphasized the depravity of man and monergism (the gracious work of God alone).<sup>5</sup> This semi-Augustinian view emphasized the sovereignty of God while maintaining an understanding of human responsibility. Some debate continued after the Synod of Orange, but the semi-Augustinian view dominated the church for the next several centuries.

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2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 22.2, 610.

4. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 845.

5. Paul K. Jewett, *Election and Predestination*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 6.

Beginning with the Reformation (16<sup>th</sup> century), predestination received much more attention. Many reformers, such as Martin Luther (1483-1546), held to an Augustinian view of predestination. John Calvin (1509-1564) also supported the view of election by emphasizing God's sovereignty. He explained, "God's good pleasure [is] over against all merits one could name; for everywhere that God's good pleasure reigns, no works may come into consideration."<sup>6</sup> Calvin also sought to better systemize and present the doctrine of predestination in a way that could be practically applied to the life of a believer. Toward the end of the century, a Dutch reformer named James Arminius (1560-1609), began to emphasize the Pelagian understanding of God's grace and man's freedom to choose whether to believe or not. He said, "For since grace, or the gratuitous love of God in Christ, is the Cause of Predestination, it is equitable that to the same grace the entire glory of this act should be ceded."<sup>7</sup> Arminius also believed that one's election is based on God's foreknowledge of one's faith. Although the views of Calvin and Arminius on predestination have been adapted and expanded in the recent centuries, their distinct understandings of God's election of man really are foundational to the understanding of this topic.

### **Corporate Election**

At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a Swiss theologian named Karl Barth (1886-1968), in his quest "to let the truth bespeak itself clearly and positively," found himself

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6. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Elise Ann McKee (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 418.

7. James Arminius, "Disputations on Some of the Principle Subjects of the Christian Religion," in *The Works of James Arminius*, vol. 2, trans. James Nichols (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2006), 228.

dissatisfied with the protestant reformation's type of theology.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Barth, through a Christocentric systematic theology called *Church Dogmatics*, explained that the doctrine of election ought to be understood as corporate in nature. Barth's corporate understanding of election contrasted the individualistic emphases of Calvinists and Arminians. Over time, Barth's idea developed and became more widely accepted among evangelical believers, particularly those who adhere to Arminian theology.<sup>9</sup> Because of this, Calvinists and adherents of corporate election have been in disagreement regarding this topic. The main argument for corporate election can be based on the corporate elements of national Israel, the writings of the apostle Paul, and the Hellenistic culture of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Mediterranean world.

### **Explanation of Corporate Election**

As opposed to the understanding of individual election, corporate election maintains that a process leads to the election of individuals. This process begins with Jesus Christ. According to Barth, election ought to be viewed in light of Christ's two distinct yet equally important roles: the electing God and the elected individual.<sup>10</sup> This can appear to be a rather complicated idea, but these two roles of Christ are the key to understanding corporate election. First, the idea that Christ is the electing God is pretty straightforward because it is based on the understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, which is affirmed all throughout Scripture. Ultimately, God is the one who accomplished election at the foundation of the world, and because Christ is part of the eternal triune

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8. Thomas F. Torrance, "Karl Barth," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 12, no. 1 (1956): 22.

9. Brian J. Abasciano, "Clearing Up Misconceptions about Corporate Election," *Ashland Theological Journal* 41 (2009): 60.

10. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh, T&T Clark Limited, 1957), 197.

Godhead, He is equally responsible for election as are the Father and the Holy Spirit (cf. John 1:1-4; 10:30; Eph. 1:3-6).<sup>11</sup> This is significant because it shows that Christ was a part of God's sovereign plan of election and redemption from the beginning.

Second, corporate election becomes far more complicated as one examines Barth's view of Christ as the elected individual, i.e., as the object of God's election.<sup>12</sup> In submission to the Father, Christ opted to become the one elected individual, i.e., He elected Himself to become the elect.<sup>13</sup> Traditional theological systems understand election to be the method through which God chooses individuals to be saved. Under the system of corporate election, though, there is a slight distinction. According to adherents of corporate election, Christ was not elected unto salvation because this simply was not necessary. His election was conditioned on His supreme righteousness and holiness. Therefore, corporate election maintains that Christ was chosen to perform a particular task.<sup>14</sup> His life, death, and resurrection provided man with the opportunity to receive salvation through faith in Him. Thus, under the system of corporate election, the ultimate (as opposed to the immediate) result of God's election is salvation.

Because Christ is the one through whom man receives salvation, He plays a significant role as the Church's representative head.<sup>15</sup> Through the Church's association with Him, it shares in His election. This is based on Christ's function as the mediator

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11. William J. Hausmann, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Election* (New York: Philosophical Library Incorporated, 1969), 35.

12. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 196.

13. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 885.

14. Clark H. Pinnock, "Divine Election as Corporate, Open, and Vocational," in *Perspectives on Election: 5 Views*, ed. Chad Owen Brand (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 294.

15. James Arminius, "Disputations on Some of the Principle Subjects of the Christian Religion," 227.

between God and man. God has elected Christ, and because He is the mediator, His election also applies to the Church.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, through the work of Christ, God chooses the Church to be the elect body that He ultimately saves, which is the essence of corporate election. According to proponents of corporate election, this election is unconditional because the Church, the body of the elected Christ, is established not through works but because of faith in Christ.<sup>17</sup>

A close relationship exists between individuals and the corporate bodies that they form. Therefore, consideration of the role of the individual in corporate election is important. Adherents of corporate election would argue that one receives the elect status through one's faith in Christ. When one believes and is saved, one becomes associated with Christ and is inaugurated into the elect body of believers, thus receiving the elect status. Corporate election, therefore, places a firm emphasis on God's choice of the community, not upon the individuals that make up the community.<sup>18</sup> This allows God's gift of salvation to be open to all of mankind, as opposed to being opened to a small group of arbitrarily chosen individuals.

Now, the process of corporate election, in and of itself, may appear to be essentially the same as that of individual election because specific individuals are still elected unto salvation. Adherents of corporate election would argue that this is not true because the community has primacy over the individuals.<sup>19</sup> All Christians can agree that

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16. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 196.

17. Brian J. Abasciano, "Corporate Election in Romans 9: A Reply to Thomas Schreiner," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49, no. 2 (June 2006): 366.

18. William W. Klein, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 265.

19. Abasciano, "Corporate Election in Romans 9," 352.

individuals receive salvation based on their faith in Christ alone. According to corporate election, individuals inherit election after they believe and join the elect body, i.e., the Church. This is distinct from the individual election view, which maintains that individuals are elect before they believe and join the body of Christ. Thus, under the system of corporate election, the election of the corporate body, as opposed to that of the individual, is central. Regarding the Church, the truth is that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”<sup>20</sup>

The relationship between the corporate body and the individuals that compose it can be described using the analogy of purchasing a baseball team.<sup>21</sup> When a wealthy person decides to purchase a team, he or she is obtaining much more than several individuals because the significance of each individual rests in his participation with the team. This relates to God’s election of the church because He essentially “bought” the Church as His “team.” This illustration can go further. In the span of time that someone owns a team, several individuals will join the team that were not initially on it, but they are still considered to be part of the team and under the domain of the owner. In the same way, as people get saved, they become members of the Church and receive the status of election. Obviously, this illustration may not be entirely consistent, but it definitely helps explain some of the complexities of corporate election.

Another important issue to discuss in regard to the individual is the idea of reprobation, i.e., the idea that God rejects some from receiving salvation. Some Calvinistic systems not only maintain that God elects some to salvation but also that God

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20. Ibid., 365.

21. Ibid.

completely rejects others from ever receiving salvation. John Wesley (1703-1791), in his effort to emphasize the graciousness of God, vehemently opposed this idea of reprobation. In his sermon entitled “Free Grace,” given at Bristol, England in 1740, he explained that if one affirms election, then one also affirms reprobation.<sup>22</sup> His point was that reprobation is in no way aligned with God’s good and loving character because it portrays Him as a “hypocrite, a deceiver of the people, a man void of common sincerity.”<sup>23</sup> He argues, therefore, that God does not elect individuals to salvation; rather, He provides humanity with prevenient grace, or “free grace,” so that all may come and believe and receive eternal life.<sup>24</sup>

Corporate election has a unique understanding of how election and reprobation work together. Both the corporate and individual systems of election agree on the fact that no one is able to properly obey God’s commands because of man’s sinful nature. Under corporate election, though, every single person is naturally in the state of rejection because man’s works are unable to save anyone. Christ took this rejection upon himself through his death on the cross and provided man with the possibility to become elect in Christ.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, according to corporate election, one moves from the state of reprobation to the state of election through faith in Christ. This understanding of predestination is able to maintain the reality of election while addressing Wesley’s concern that God could be unrighteously condemning people.

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22. John Wesley, “Free Grace,” in *The Sermons of John Wesley: A Collection for the Christian Journey*, ed. Kenneth J. Collins and Jason E. Vickers (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013), 23.

23. *Ibid.*, 28.

24. *Ibid.*, 22.

25. W. Travis McMaken, “Election and the Pattern of Exchange in Karl Barth’s Doctrine of the Atonement,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 3 (2009): 209.

Salvation of the individual definitely is an important result of corporate election, but this is not the end of the process. According to corporate election, the elect are purposefully called to complete a particular task.<sup>26</sup> This sort of election to a certain task pervades all of Scripture. As mentioned earlier, God did not elect Christ unto salvation because Christ was already sinless and was in no need of saving. Rather, God chose Christ to provide a way for man to receive redemption. The work of Christ sets the model for all of those who are elect in Him. Like Christ, the individual members of the Church have the responsibility to bring the message of redemption to mankind. Thus, through their evangelistic work, the body of believers plays a key role in salvation history in that they are Christ's tools as He ushers in the kingdom.<sup>27</sup>

### **Evidence Given for Corporate Election**

**Israel.** Corporate election is not unique to the New Testament. Election pervades the entire Old Testament, particularly in the story of Israel. In fact, the idea of the corporate election of Israel is foundational to understanding the corporate election of the Church. The election of Israel begins with the Abrahamic Covenant. In Genesis 12:2, God promises Abraham, "I will make you a great nation" (NASB). This is God's promise to Abraham that the nation of Israel will arise from his descendants. With this promise, God elects Abraham to be the first representative head of national Israel. The result is that his descendants ultimately are elect through their relationship with him.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, God promises Abraham that he "shall be a blessing" (Gen. 12:2). This relates to the vocational task that Abraham has as the elect one of God. In isolation, this idea of the

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26. Pinnock, "Divine Election as Corporate, Open, and Vocational," 286.

27. Klein, *The New Chosen People*, 268.

28. *Ibid.*, 260.

vocational task is rather vague, but as the promise is understood in regard to the rest of Scripture, the task ultimately relates to the spiritual blessings that come through faith in Christ.<sup>29</sup>

God continued this model by His election of more specified representative heads. Of Abraham's descendants, God limits the election to Isaac over Ishmael. He also limits election to Jacob over Esau. In the context of Genesis, this election has to do with God's choice of nations via their representative heads. In Genesis 25:23, God says to Rebekah the wife of Isaac, "Two nations are in your womb; and two peoples will be separated from your body; and one people shall be stronger than the other; and the older shall serve the younger." This promise, like the Abrahamic Covenant, points to the election of a group of people through one man. Jacob is viewed as the representative head of the elect body, allowing all of his descendants to be considered elect. This type of election can be considered strictly unconditional. Because Jacob is guilty of lying to His father Isaac, Jacob clearly does not deserve to be elected based on merit, but God chooses him regardless (cf. Gen. 27:1-40).<sup>30</sup>

From Jacob comes the nation of Israel, whose members are God's chosen people. God elects Israel as His covenantal partner. Through the covenant, God gives Israel a variety of responsibilities that the nation is to fulfill. Particularly, Israel is called to uphold God's law (cf. Exod. 19:4-6). Through this obedience, the Israelites are to make known the name of God to the Gentile nations.<sup>31</sup> This is significant because salvation in the Old Testament is not merely based on one's association with Israel. People are

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29. Abasciano, "Corporate Election in Romans 9," 355.

30. Pinnock, "Divine Election as Corporate, Open, and Vocational," 286.

31. *Ibid.*, 287.

instead saved through their faith in God (cf. Rom. 4:1-5; Gal. 3:6-9). Thus, through Israel's witness, Gentiles can become believers and join the elect nation of Israel.

According to corporate election, the evangelistic function of Israel is very similar to the purpose of the elected church, i.e., Israel has a redemptive purpose for those who are not elect. The vocation of Israel is best understood through the example of Rahab the prostitute. While some of the Israelites spy out Jericho, Rahab protects them from the king, and when the Israelites invade Jericho, Rahab's whole household is spared (Josh. 2:1-21; 6:22-23). Rahab ultimately joins Israel and becomes elect through her faith in God (cf. Heb. 11:31).<sup>32</sup> This example serves to show that Israel, as God's elect body, has the responsibility to display the person of God to the Gentiles.

Beyond all of this, a very close relationship exists between Israel and the Church. This relationship can be understood as typological because Israel is God's elect body in the Old Testament, and the Church is His elect body in the New Testament. Also, this relationship ought to be viewed in light of the work of Christ. Israel is called to honor its election through faithful obedience to God, but they fail to do this and reject their election.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, Christ comes to earth in order to establish a new elect community, the Church. This new body has the same mission of making God's name known. The Church is supreme, though, because it is comprised of both Jews and Gentiles.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the Church in Christ is the perfected system of God's election.

**Pauline Epistles.** Adherents of corporate election argue that their view is affirmed all throughout the New Testament, particularly in the writings of Paul. For

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32. Abasciano, "Clearing Up Misconceptions about Corporate Election," 73.

33. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 198.

34. Pinnock, "Divine Election as Corporate, Open, and Vocational," 288.

example, in Romans 9, Paul uses Israel to explain his understanding of election. He explains that much of Israel has rejected Christ and is not saved. The fact that they are descendants of Abraham does not automatically entitle them to salvation. Rather, true salvation is based on faith in Christ (Rom. 9:1-13). Proponents of corporate election would argue that because this passage is primarily about salvation rather than election, salvation is the way through which one receives the true blessings of election.<sup>35</sup> More specifically, Paul distinguishes justification by faith from justification by works, which relates back to the discussion of Abraham. Salvation is based on faith alone, not on works, nor on genealogy. Therefore, the Jews that have come to believe in Christ have received salvation and thus election.<sup>36</sup>

Later on in the letter, in Romans 11:16-24, Paul uses an interesting olive tree metaphor. According to corporate election, the tree represents the elect body of faith. The branches represent the individuals that make up that body. Individuals can be “grafted” into the body through faith in order to receive salvation.<sup>37</sup> Proponents of corporate election would argue that this metaphor affirms corporate election because “if the root is holy, the branches are too” (Rom. 11:16). This understanding of corporate election reveals that God has elected Christ, so the believers that are a part of the Church through their faith in Christ are also given the elect status.

Another key verse adherents of corporate election use to explain their view is Ephesians 1:4, which says, “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that

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35. Abasciano, “Corporate Election in Romans 9,” 361.

36. James Arminius, “Analysis of the Ninth Chapter of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans” in *The Works of James Arminius*, vol. 3, trans. William Nichols (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2006), 493-494.

37. Abasciano, “Corporate Election in Romans 9,” 362.

we would be holy and blameless before Him.” This verse really explains several of the major components of election. According to corporate election, through Paul’s use of “us,” he is affirming that God elected, not individual, but the entire body of Christ. “In Him” is a phrase that Paul often uses to denote election because it has to do with a believer’s unity with Christ.<sup>38</sup> Proponents of corporate election would point out that as one is unified with Christ, God’s true elect man, one joins the elect body. In this passage, Paul goes on to explain the role of faith in this process by saying, “Having also believed, you were sealed in Him” (Eph. 1:13). Under the corporate view of election, this passage shows that God has elected the Church in Christ, and one is able to enter this elect body through faith.

**Hellenistic Culture.** An important consideration regarding hermeneutics relates to how cultural background can affect one’s interpretation of Scripture. In the modern Western world, society generally emphasizes individuals over groups.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, as a Westerner reads Scripture, he or she will naturally be inclined to look at Scripture with an individualistic worldview. Not surprisingly, many Westerners adhere to the view that God elects individuals as opposed to a community. Despite this, in studying Scripture, one ought not superimpose one’s own cultural background onto the text because each writing contained in Scripture was written in a context that is very different than today’s culture.

The key passages that discuss the doctrine of election are found in the Apostle Paul’s letters. Paul and many of the recipients lived in the Hellenistic Mediterranean

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38. Abasciano, “Clearing Up Misconceptions about Corporate Election,” 67.

39. Abasciano, “Corporate Election in Romans 9,” 356.

culture, which has some key distinctions from today's western culture. Particularly, this Hellenistic culture can be described as "dyadic," which means that people view themselves as individuals and also as members of groups. Primarily, individuals think "of themselves in relation to others and not as separate entities."<sup>40</sup> Therefore, the people in this culture viewed the community as a central aspect of life and placed little emphasis on the individuals that make up the community. Proponents of corporate election would argue that when Paul wrote these passages about election, he likely had the Church, as opposed to the individual, in mind. His readers could have understood these writings in such a way. Based on this understanding of the context of the New Testament, some aspects of corporate election could possibly have been extremely culturally relevant to the people of that time.

### **The Role of Individual Election**

Clearly, the doctrine of corporate election can be appealing. In addition to its biblical basis, its application regarding evangelism is rather practical. Those who adhere to corporate election believe that all are able to receive the gift of salvation. The belief in the universal availability of the Gospel is based on the Church's vocation of bringing the message of redemption of mankind. Thus believers, in their evangelistic efforts, can have confidence that God can bring anyone to salvation.<sup>41</sup> The appeal rests in the attempt to find the balance between the sovereignty of God in election and human responsibility in man's free choice to put his faith in Christ. Despite this, the system of corporate election falls short in a number of ways. Particularly, adherents of corporate election fail to

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40. Klein, *The New Chosen People*, 260.

41. *Ibid.*, 282-283.

properly address and interact with the scriptural evidence for individual election. With an understanding of God's unconditional election of individuals, certain aspects of corporate election can be much better understood.

### **Explanation of Individual Election**

Individual election is not a concept that ought to be understood in isolation. Individual election must first be understood as either unconditional or conditional.<sup>42</sup> In order to understand the conditionality of election, though, one must first consider the depravity of man, which, as mentioned earlier, was one of Augustine's main tenets.<sup>43</sup> Man is completely sinful because he inherited the sinful nature from Adam (cf. Rom. 5:12-21). The sinful nature prohibits man from doing anything good in the sight of God. Without God's grace, man cannot even believe in Jesus Christ for salvation. In particular, the New Testament explains man's depravity. For example, Romans 3:23 says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Additionally, 1 Corinthians 15:21-22 explains that death is a result of Adam's sin and that "in Adam all die." All of this shows man's inability to rightly come before a holy God.

With a proper understanding of the depravity of man established, God's election must be strictly unconditional. By definition, unconditional election is the "claim that God's selection of those whom he would save was not based upon (or not 'conditioned' on) some fact or feature of those individual's lives."<sup>44</sup> The harsh reality is that God

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42. The distinction between unconditional election and conditional election is central to the debate between Calvinism and Arminianism. Calvinists adhere to unconditional election, and Arminians adhere to conditional election.

43. Augustine, *City of God*, 14.2, 241.

44. Bruce A. Ware, "Divine Election to Salvation," in *Perspectives on Election: 5 Views*, ed. Chad Owen Brand (Nashville, TN: B&N Publishing Group, 2006), 2.

should not have elected anyone at all, but the beautiful truth is that He did elect some, despite their complete corruption and sinfulness.<sup>45</sup> An important aspect of unconditional election particularly emphasizes the sovereignty of God. If God is truly sovereign, then He is the one who actually allows everything to happen, which would also entail that His election is unconditional.<sup>46</sup> Beyond this, God's election cannot be based on any sort of foreknowledge of an individual's faith, as Arminians would argue. If election were based on foreknowledge, then the whole system rests on the decision of man instead of the work of God.<sup>47</sup> Despite this, election is based entirely on the decision that God makes out of His own sovereign will, which weakens the argument for conditional election.

Individual election is the understanding that God has elected individual people to receive the gift of salvation. Indeed, all men are condemned because of their depravity, but those who come to saving faith in Christ only do so because of God's unconditional election. Now, if unconditional election is true, then the truth of individual election logically follows (cf. Rom. 8:28-20). This concept is based on an understanding of God's sovereignty. Because God is sovereign, He foreordained everything that would happen in the world before He even created anything. God, in His omniscience, would have knowledge of the election of some unto salvation. If God knows exactly who the elect are, then He also knows precisely which individuals will live in the eternal kingdom. Therefore, God's unconditional election is also individual election.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, God's

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45. Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 343.

46. Ware, "Divine Election to Salvation," 23.

47. *Ibid.*, 5.

48. *Ibid.*, 46.

election of individuals makes sense simply because the Church is made up of individuals. Ultimately, unconditional individual election is God's act of grace for completely sinful people who deserve nothing but death. Therefore, election indeed is a gift and a blessing, and believers and non-believers alike ought to remember this truth (cf. Rom. 6:23).

### **Evidence Given for Individual Election**

**The Gospel of John.** An abundance of Scripture in the New Testament supports the doctrine of individual election. During His life, Jesus says a number of things that relate to soteriology, and many of these sayings have to do with election. In John 6:35-40, Jesus explains that He is the bread of life. Particularly, John 6:40 points to Jesus' emphasis on salvation. When He says, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me," the context shows that "come" actually means "believe" (John 6:37).<sup>49</sup> Those whom the Father gives to Jesus will ultimately receive salvation. Jesus' use of "all" may appear to be an address to a group of people, but this is not entirely true. Clearly, not every person in the world comes to saving faith in Jesus. In this context, then, Jesus is addressing specific individuals that will come to believe.<sup>50</sup> Finally, the emphasis on election in this passage comes from the word "gives." God elects certain individuals, and they believe in Christ because of their election. Thus, they are given to Christ in order to be saved by Him.<sup>51</sup>

Later on in John 10:11-18, Jesus describes Himself as the good shepherd. Again, this passage is primarily addressing Jesus' role in the salvation of man (cf. John 10:11). Since Jesus is the shepherd and the savior, the sheep are the ones who are saved. More

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49. Thomas R. Schreiner, "Corporate and Individual Election in Romans 9: A Response to Brian Abasciano," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49, no. 2 (June 2006): 378.

50. Ware, "Divine Election to Salvation," 43.

51. Schreiner, "Corporate and Individual Election in Romans 9," 378.

specifically, they are elected individuals. This is evident, for example, when Jesus says that He knows His sheep and that He “[lays] down [His] life for the sheep” (John 10:14-15). Clearly, a unique relationship exists between Jesus and specific individuals who are saved, i.e., they are the elect.<sup>52</sup> Now, this passage may seem like it does not discuss election, but Jesus’ point can be better understood as He continues to speak. He says, “I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd (John 10:16).” Essentially, Jesus is saying that there are other individuals who have not yet come to saving faith.<sup>53</sup> Jesus is not discussing His hope in future evangelistic campaigns. On the contrary, He is entirely confident that the other sheep will be saved simply because they are elect.

Finally, during Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer, He further explains election (John 17:6-10). Again, He uses the word “give” all throughout the passage in reference to God’s election of individuals. Specifically, He references the disciples by saying, “They were Yours and You gave them to Me” (John 17:6). Jesus is implying that God elected the disciples before Jesus literally called them.<sup>54</sup> Now, Jesus could appear to be praying only about the disciples. Despite this, in John 17:20-21, Jesus prays specifically for future believers, which implies that they are elect, just like the disciples.<sup>55</sup> Jesus understands that the salvation He is to bring is specifically for those whom the Father has elected and thus given to Him in salvation.

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52. Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 126.

53. Ware, “Divine Election to Salvation,” 44.

54. *Ibid.*, 7.

55. *Ibid.*

**Other New Testament Examples.** Not only does Jesus discuss the doctrine of individual election, but evidence for individual election is also found throughout the rest of the New Testament. On Paul's first missionary journey, he and Barnabas stop to evangelize at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:13-52). After the Jews reject their teachings, many Gentiles gladly accept the message of the Gospel. Luke writes, "When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). The keyword in this verse is "appointed" because Luke could just as easily have used the word "believed." The use of "appointed" is significant because it implies that they were chosen to receive eternal life before they actually believed, i.e., they are God's elect.<sup>56</sup> This verse is even more powerful in light of its broader context. A number of the Jews reject Paul and Barnabas' message, yet the Gentiles receive it. At this point in time, God has begun to bring His message to the Gentiles.<sup>57</sup> Thus, God elected these individuals for the sake of His future purpose.

In Paul's epistle to the Romans, he addresses the topic of election in a number of ways. One of the ways that he most clearly addresses individual election is Romans 8:29, which says, "Those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son." Now, this verse is a key verse for proponents of conditional election because of its reference to God's foreknowledge. This foreknowledge, though, is not God's previous knowledge of an individual's actions or faith. Instead, foreknowledge is

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56. Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, 127.

57. Ware, "Divine Election to Salvation," 8.

God's personal knowledge of that individual.<sup>58</sup> Evidence for this idea is based on the context of the verse. The following verse says, "These whom He predestined, He also called," and those who are called are ultimately justified and glorified (Rom. 8:30). Thus, only those who are predestined by God can be saved. Indeed, all who are predestined will be saved by the faithful work of God alone. Since not everyone is saved, this calling cannot merely be for everyone. Therefore, God's election is unconditional and for individuals.

Another one of Scripture's references to individual election is in 2 Thessalonians 2:13, which says, "God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth." This verse points out that God's election happened "from the beginning," i.e., before man even existed. God's election could not have been based on man's actions simply because man did not yet exist, making the election unconditional.<sup>59</sup> This verse also emphasizes the work of God alone in the salvation of man.<sup>60</sup> God elected the individuals that made up the Church of Thessalonica. In summary, the New Testament as a whole affirms that God has elected individuals unconditionally for salvation through Jesus Christ.

### **Individual Election and Corporate Election**

With the argument for individual election established, the views on corporate election must be examined in light of the understanding of individual election. This comparison will reveal areas of agreement and disagreement between corporate and

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58. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 676.

59. Ware, "Divine Election to Salvation," 14.

60. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 344.

individual election in order reconcile some areas. As discussed at length above, there are a few key texts (Romans 9 and 11 and Ephesians 1) that proponents of corporate election use in support of their views. Despite their claims these proponents have misinterpreted some aspects of these passages. Therefore, these misinterpretations ought to be clarified in order to better understand the role that individual election plays in understanding corporate election.

**Romans 9:1-29.** Romans 9 is one of the most important passages in Paul's epistle to the Romans because it discusses the future of Israel. Because Paul spends so much time examining Israel's fate, Paul's discussion of election may appear to be directed at the fate of nations instead of the salvation of individuals. This idea comes primarily from Romans 9:7-13, which addresses the roles of Isaac and Jacob regarding the future of the Jews. Paul's discussion in this passage is primarily about salvation. This is evident from the opening verses (Rom. 9:1-5). Paul is expressing his deep grief for his Jewish brothers and sisters because they are not saved. He even goes so far as to say that he would be willing to be "separated from Christ" for their sake (Rom. 9:3). Because Paul is Jewish, he would have no need to speak with such intense urgency if he were discussing the election of nations rather than that of individuals. Despite Paul's impassioned introduction, he still has hope. In Romans 9:6, he proclaims that the word of God has not failed. Thus, he is hopeful that his Jewish brethren will come to saving faith in Christ.<sup>61</sup>

With these themes established, Paul goes on to discuss in further detail the salvific state of individual Jews. Romans 9:8 is key, and it says, "It is not the children of the flesh

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61. Thomas R. Schreiner, "Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election unto Salvation?" in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 95.

who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants.” “The children of the promise” simply are those who have come to saving faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>62</sup> Paul is pointing out that the Jews are not saved simply because of their nationality, i.e., their relationship to Abraham. He explains this by using the examples of Ishmael and Esau (Rom. 9:7-12). This is significant because it shows the Jews their need for salvation through faith in Christ.

Paul also takes this opportunity to use the respective destinies of Jacob and Esau, i.e., Jacob’s election and Esau’s rejection, as examples in order to discuss the doctrine of election. Paul may appear to be discussing the election of nations, but that is not entirely true in this context. Paul is pointing out that God is establishing the church (His “New Covenant people”) in the same way he established Israel (His “Old Covenant people”): through election.<sup>63</sup> Because this passage is about salvation, Paul is saying that this people will be elected unto salvation. Paul further explains this concept when he says, “It does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy” (Rom. 9:16). Again, Paul is attesting to God’s unconditional election. One would naturally expect that God would choose Jacob over Esau based on their actions, but Jacob was not perfectly righteous (cf. Gen. 27:1-29). Thus, Paul is explaining here that election is simply based upon neither man’s heritage nor his holiness; it is based solely on God’s sovereign choice.<sup>64</sup>

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62. Ibid., 92.

63. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 586.

64. John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 62.

Paul concludes this section on a rather hopeful note. He understands that His readers may find what he is saying to be rather harsh, so he appropriately responds by using an analogy to describe God's sovereignty (Rom. 9:19-21). He describes a potter who has complete control over his clay. Paul's point is that because man is God's creation, man has no right to question God's actions, but this should act as a comfort because of God's goodness (cf. Rom. 9:22-24). Now, this analogy may seem extreme, but if the sovereignty of God is properly understood, then it is fair.<sup>65</sup> Paul further encourages his Jewish readers by reminding them that God has "called [to salvation], not from among the Jews only, but also from among the Gentiles" (Rom. 9:24). The hope rests in the truth that God has not given up on Israel because there is a "remnant" of Jews that He has elected unto salvation (Rom. 9:27).<sup>66</sup>

This interpretation of Romans 9 supports God's unconditional election of individuals, but it also is able to affirm corporate election at the same time. Proponents of individual election and corporate election alike will agree that this passage is primarily about election. Traditional corporate election emphasizes the way that man's faith allows him to join the body of the elect. Indeed, one must have faith in Christ in order to join His body, but individual election is the reason why one can even have faith. This idea is based on Paul's reference to the election of a number of individuals. This evidence is particularly based on Paul's frequent use of singular pronouns (Rom. 9:15-16, 19, 21).<sup>67</sup> Another key aspect of the harmony between individual election and corporate election is found in Paul's discussion of Isaac and Jacob. Paul's point is that the model of election of

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65. Jewett, *Election and Predestination*, 80.

66. Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, 129.

67. Schreiner, "Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election unto Salvation?" 99.

nations unto God's favor has changed to election of individuals unto salvation (Rom. 9:6-13).<sup>68</sup> While the passage is primarily discussing salvation, the role of groups need not be disregarded. Isaac and Jacob were individuals elected by God to act as representative heads of His chosen people, Israel. In the same way, individuals are elected by God to receive salvation and thus inaugurated into the Church. Overall, this passage primarily presents election as unconditional and individualistic but it still is able to support certain claims of corporate election.

**Romans 11:1-32.** Paul further explains the idea of the remnant of believing Jews in Romans 11:11-32. Because Romans 11 is a continuation of Romans 9:1-29, Paul is discussing the same topic in both passages: salvation. This observation helps to clarify Paul's first statement in this section. He begins by showing that God has not rejected all of Israel because many Jews have come to salvation, particularly Paul himself (Rom. 11:1). With this point, Paul defends individual election by pointing out that God elects individuals out of a larger group.<sup>69</sup> In fact, this is the essence of the remnant: God elected some Jews, His chosen people of the Old Covenant, to receive the blessings of the New Covenant through faith.

In Romans 11:5-7, Paul clarifies the nature of the election of individuals that make up the remnant. First, he says that the remnant exists "according to God's gracious choice" (Rom. 11:5). He also says that God elects individuals not "on the basis of works" (Rom. 11:6). Essentially, Paul is explaining that God's election of anyone is entirely

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68. Ibid., 90.

69. Ibid., 99.

“unearned, undeserved, unmerited,” which again shows that election is unconditional.<sup>70</sup>

Finally, Paul expresses how this truth relates to the individual Jew by saying that the remnant has received salvation because it was chosen (Rom. 11:7). Thus, based on Paul’s understanding of unconditional election, God has elected individual Jews to partake in the blessings of salvation. Significance rests in the fact that election is a result of God’s graciousness, which shows that He simply cannot have malicious intentions in His election of specific individuals.

One of the most significant sections of this passage is Romans 11:16-24, in which Paul uses the analogy of an olive tree and its many branches. The example of the branches being “grafted” into the tree shows that when individuals believe, they become a part of the body of faith through Christ (Rom. 11:17, 19, 23-24). This interpretation points to both individual election and corporate election. The context of the passage ought to be considered in order to fully understand what Paul is saying. Because he has been discussing Israel’s need for salvation, the tree represents those who partake in the promises of salvation and thus join the body of Christ.<sup>71</sup> The distinct emphasis here is that Paul is now addressing Gentiles (cf. Rom. 11:11-15). Thus, this passage seeks to communicate the need for Gentiles to turn to God in belief.

Paul further explores this olive tree metaphor. He starts by explaining that some branches were “broken off” the tree (Rom. 11:17). This shows that at one point the Jews were considered to be God’s chosen people simply because of their nationality, but in order for them to receive the blessings of salvation now, they must put their faith in

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70. Ware, “Divine Election to Salvation,” 11.

71. Schreiner, “Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election unto Salvation?” 95.

Christ.<sup>72</sup> Despite this, God's blessing is not restricted to the Jews only; rather, Gentiles also can receive the blessings of the promises of God through faith in Christ and thus be "grafted" into the tree. Therefore, under the New Covenant, access into corporate body of Christ and its blessing is open to all who believe. Paul's distinction is that God's election precedes an individual's belief.

**Ephesians 1:3-11.** Ephesians 1:3-11 is a passage that plainly discusses election. Paul particularly addresses the timing of this election. Ephesians 1:4 says, "[God] chose us in Him before the foundation of the world." This brief timeline is significant because it shows that God has control of the process of salvation from the very beginning and will continue to control it throughout all of eternity.<sup>73</sup> Also, the fact that God's election occurred before He created the world points to His unconditional election. Because man had not yet been created, there were no actions of man for God to foresee. This means that God's choice of who would be saved was completely based on His own will.<sup>74</sup>

Additionally, Paul is emphasizing corporate election through individual election in this passage. He states that God "chose" and "predestined" believers (Eph. 1:4-5). He also mentions the work of God in salvation in other parts of the passage (cf. Eph. 1:4-6, 8-9, 11). This passage contains a number of corporate elements that ought not be overlooked. Although Paul is addressing a group, he is referencing the individual believers, and this evidence shows that God's election is for individuals.<sup>75</sup> These unconditionally elected individuals now make up a corporate body of believers. Paul's

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72. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 701.

73. Ware, "Divine Election to Salvation," 13.

74. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 678.

75. Ware, "Divine Election to Salvation," 45.

reference to election “in Christ” further explains this idea. Christ is the elected corporate head of the elect body through His atoning work on the cross, and elect individuals gain access to the body of believers through their faith “in Him” (Eph. 1:4-5, 7, 9-10).<sup>76</sup> Paul’s focus is on the election of individuals, rather than that of Christ, but he still recognizes the corporate elements of election.

### **Conclusion and Application**

The relationship between individual and corporate election is extremely dynamic, and each side has its own merit and a good deal of convincing evidence. Corporate election is commonly explained as an adaptation of the Arminian view of election because both views maintain that faith that results in salvation is based primarily on the decision of man instead of that of God.<sup>77</sup> Based on this observation, individual election and corporate election may seem entirely incompatible.<sup>78</sup> However, Corporate election differs from the Arminian view of election because of the emphasis on God’s sovereignty through His election of Jesus Christ as the corporate head of the Church. Overall, the above interaction of numerous New Testament texts points to individual election as the system that God has established in order to bring man to faith and thus to salvation. This faith, then, inaugurates believers into the corporate body of the elect Christ.

Many aspects of corporate election are important for believers to consider. For example, corporate election highly emphasizes the need for Christian mission and evangelism. The system of unconditional election of individuals could seem to have not much of a need for this, but this is not true. Unbelieving individuals, not God, are

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76. Schreiner, “Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election unto Salvation?” 103.

77. Ware, “Divine Election to Salvation,” 5.

78. Schreiner, “Corporate and Individual Election in Romans 9,” 378.

responsible for their lack of salvation because they are the ones who choose to not believe.<sup>79</sup> Thus, believers have the responsibility to bring the Gospel to others so that some might believe (cf. Rom. 10:14-15). Additionally, believers are called to bring God's word to the world. The New Testament is filled with commissions to bring the Gospel to lost people (cf. Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46-48; John 20:21-23; Acts 1:8). If believers did not do this, then few people who would actually come to saving faith in Christ.

Furthermore, there are other major emphases of corporate election that are important regarding Bible study. For example, corporate election emphasizes the relationship between Israel and the Church as two of God's corporate bodies. As mentioned above, this relationship is dynamic, but an understanding of the role that Israel plays in each dispensation of salvation history is important. Additionally, corporate election seeks to abandon the individualistic Western thought processes in order to properly interpret Scripture. In reality, proponents of both individual election and corporate election can be guilty of imposing their own cultural backgrounds onto the text of Scripture.<sup>80</sup> Despite this, one must not interpret Scripture through the lens of today's culture. Because the Bible is made up of real, historical documents, the interpretation of any given text ought to be based on historical context. Thus, a proper understanding of the doctrine of corporate election can be useful to a believer.

Evidence shows that God unconditionally elects individuals unto salvation, and through their faith in Christ, they are inaugurated into His body. This is a remarkably

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79. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 343.

80. Schreiner, "Corporate and Individual Election in Romans 9," 384.

wonderful truth. Indeed, none deserved to be elected, but God, in His mercy, goodness, and love provided a way for man to come to Christ.<sup>81</sup> A proper understanding of this concept ought to lead believers to humility before God (cf. Rom. 11:18-22). Consider the words of praise that Paul gives unto God in one of his most important discussions about election: “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? To Him be the glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:33-34, 36b).

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81. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 343.

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