

TOWARD A SYSTEMATIC AND EXEGETICAL EXAMINATION OF
ELECTION AND FREE WILL

A Non-Credit Project

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The winter wind nips at the cheeks of the newlyweds as they leave the chapel and cross the parking lot to begin their life together. Yet within two years this happy couple will walk into the marriage counselor's office for the first time. While still in love and fully committed to each other, they have become increasingly aware that their differences are significant enough to warrant special attention. In an effort to better understand each other and to grow in their love for each other, it is necessary that they spend some time considering their differences and the reasons behind them.

The winter wind nips at the cheeks of a pastor of the Baptist Missionary Association (BMA) as he crosses the campus and enters his first class at Covenant (Presbyterian) Seminary. This class is the beginning for many wonderful relationships, yet over the next months as a student this pastor regularly deals with a doctrinal perspective that is quite different from his theological upbringing and training. So, this pastor-student finds himself – myself – in the same situation that many people discover not long after the wedding: I am in relationships with ones I love and genuinely value, yet I grapple with some significant differences I wish to understand better.

In order to better understand these differences an independent study was undertaken of Calvinism in general, with a special focus on the election – free will debate from both theological and historical perspectives. Ultimately the desired goals were (1) to reevaluate and solidify my own theology concerning election and free will through an exegetical study of the scriptures, with particular attention to whether election is unconditional, irresistible, or particular; and (2) to attempt to understand the debate and its various aspects within its historical context.

This paper will attempt to address the former; a separate companion study has addressed the latter.¹

The examination of the election – free will discussion to date revealed a number of difficulties which must be avoided in order to not skew this study’s findings. First, presented arguments, and presumably their underlying investigative procedures, often involve an examination of verses without due consideration of the inherent connotations of the individual words and/or the contextual implications. This faulty methodology gives misinformation and bias a greater chance to influence the interpretation. A preferable method is to first examine the terms for their range and limitations in meanings and implications, and then from this foundation examine the applicable verses for their intended meanings within their contexts. Following such a pattern, this study will first pursue a succinct examination of significant words and then investigate pertinent passages in which those words appear.

A second problem arises from the type of Biblical texts available on the subject, and the improper methodology used in handling them at times. Simply put, there are no primary texts on election or free will – i.e., what the Bible teaches on this subject actually comes from verses that primarily focus on something else.

To illustrate the impact this can have – which is especially impacting on interpretation methodology – consider a man describing the process of changing an automobile tire. If the purpose of his description is to teach his twelve-year old-son the correct way to do the job, then tire-changing is the primary focus and the man is rightly expected to adequately discuss all significant factors in that process. However, if the man’s description is to explain to his wife why he is so dirty (which happened while changing a tire), tire-changing per se is not the primary

¹ Don Burke, *The Historical Election – Free Will Debate: Reflections on the Chemistry of the Conflict* (St. Louis: Covenant Theological Seminary, 2009).

focus. In this case it would not be surprising – and in fact is expected – that the man’s story will omit key factors in the changing process that had no bearing on his primary purpose. For example, when tire-changing is the primary focus the man includes a description of the proper tightening pattern and torque in securing the lug nuts; when this is not the primary focus his omission of that very key factor is expected, and no one assumes that the omission implies a lack of importance.

In similar fashion, a Bible passage making incidental or even secondary reference to election and/or free will cannot be viewed with the same scrutiny for detail as a passage in which they are the primary purpose. Specifically, the arguments based upon the silence of omission, such as those Peterson commonly relies upon,² are normally unwise and the conclusions are unreliable. This study will strive to avoid drawing conclusions from silence.

Another difficulty this study encountered was biased findings in sources (some of which are noted in this paper). Because of the deep-rooted issues in this debate and the impact that it has upon one’s theological perspective, it is disappointing but not surprising that articles even among some primary resources (e.g., lexical sources) were deemed to be based upon the authors’ a priori theology and ideology, and not upon objective analysis. Due to this perceived bias, combined with a desire to base findings on work directly with scriptures itself, all forms of textual analyses in this study (e.g. occurrence counts, usage categorizations) were personally prepared by this student and not cited from other sources.

² An example of such an argument may be found in the following: “It is true that the ‘many . . . people’ referred to in Acts 18:10 had not yet believed. But the text says nothing about God’s foreseeing their faith” and Peterson thereby concludes the passage weighs in against a God-foreseen faith (emphasis added; Robert A. Peterson, *Election and Free Will: God’s Gracious Choice and Our Responsibility* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Pub., 2007), 71). While Peterson is right that the verse says nothing on the subject, that silence does not imply the conclusion that he makes from it. The silence simply means that the passage does not speak to the issue, and that gives no support to either side.

Election

Some non-Calvinists might be surprised to know that election is a Biblical term with a legitimate place in Biblical theology. If it is a Biblical term deserving a Biblical recognition, then one must ask what is its Biblical meaning? And of particular interest to this study, does that meaning include intended implications of irresistibility, unconditionality, and particularism?

Election Terms in the Old Testament.

This examination of Biblical election begins with the OT term בָּחַר (bachar), which basically means “choose.”³ To this core definition Oswalt adds, “It is important to note . . . that it always involves a careful, well thought-out choice.”⁴

It is telling that Oswalt also states that this word “. . . is used only in a few instances without specific theological overtones. . . . Apart from these exceptions, the word is used to express that choosing which has ultimate and eternal significance.”⁵ However, this statement is inconsistent with this study’s findings. Approximately one-third (far more than Oswalt’s “few instances”) of the occurrences of בָּחַר examined in this study were identified as either the choices of mankind or an adjectival form associated with temporal items. In addition to these, a large percentage of the remaining occurrences could easily connote nothing more than God’s selections without deeper “theological overtones.” It seems Oswalt desires to give בָּחַר a greater theological significance than its definition and usage warrant.

³ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1906; reprint, 2003), 103.

⁴ John N. Oswalt, “בָּחַר (bāhar) to Choose, Elect, Decide For,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), v1: 100.

⁵ Ibid.

Like Oswalt, Coenen attempts to over-stretch the implications of the word, stating that it upholds the Calvinistic doctrine of election and God's unconditional sovereignty.⁶ Apparently expecting the reader to blindly accept this statement, he gives no justification for his conclusion. Furthermore he fails to realize that it is inconsistent with many occurrences of the term.

In short, the term בָּחַר basically means "to choose" or "to select," with no inherent deeper theological implications. This should be the default connotation of the term unless contextual implications require otherwise.

This study next attempted to identify, categorize (based upon the various subjects and objects of the choosing) and then analyze the various occurrence of בָּחַר and its applicable derivatives.

Occurrences with Human Subjects. Strangely missing in many of the Calvinistic writings on election is any mention of בָּחַר used of human choices. This study found that no less than 30% of occurrences refer to such human activities, including the selection of a craftsman's materials (Is. 40:20), wives (Gen. 6:2), and "able men" as elders over the nation (Ex. 18:25). The connotation is obviously of simple selection or choosing, and nothing that would warrant a translation of "election" (in a religious sense) with its attending implications. Certainly there is no hint of foreordination in these occurrences.

Irresistibility should be examined in passages involving animate objects. בָּחַר is used of choosing wives (Gen. 6:2), warriors (Josh. 8:3), and even God as the One people serve (Josh. 24:15, 22; cf. Deut. 30:15-16, 19). Do these verses suggest an inherent irresistibility? Is the wife or the warrior without any option other than quiet, passive, irresistible compliance? Surely no

⁶ L. Coenen, "ἐκλέγομαι," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), v1: 538.

one would suggest that when a person chooses God that such “election” places Him in a position of irresistible compliance. Thus בָּחַר has no underlying implication of irresistibility.

Particularly interesting to this study are the last two passages cited (Josh. 24:15, 22 and Deut. 30:15-16, 19). These clearly imply the commitment to God is a choice made of free will.

The occurrences of בָּחַר in this category indicate that the condition of the elected likely influenced the elector in his process of election. A bride must meet the criteria of the man selecting her, and the warrior must meet the conditions necessary to accomplish the task to which he will be assigned. To read “unconditional” into such occurrences of בָּחַר is not only unfounded, it is actually contrary to the implied connotation. The question of particularism in this case seems a normal part of choosing rather than particularism in the Calvinistic sense.

Thus, in this first and largest category one finds no inherent connection between בָּחַר and election that is unconditional, irresistible, or particular – in fact the opposite seems to be implied. However, since this is a non-soteric use of the term, it seems best to not too quickly assume these factors are transferable to soteric election.

God Choosing a Place. The second largest category of בָּחַר occurrences was composed of forty-four references to God selecting a place. Occurrences range from Deuteronomy to Zechariah, with no less than half being in pre-conquest Deuteronomy and Joshua. These regularly speak in such expressions as “the place which the LORD your God will choose . . .” (Deut. 12:5, emphasis added). Conditionality does not appear to be addressed, and as discussed earlier such silence is support for neither Calvinistic election nor free will. It is possible that particularism is contextually implied in some of the earlier passages (i.e., before the time Jerusalem’s chosen-ness was realized). Irresistibility is a moot point in this category, since the object of choice is inanimate and unable to resist.

God Choosing Israel. The third largest occurrences of בָּחַר relate to God's selection of Israel as His "chosen people." Dr. Ron Mitchell, a BMA Bible professor, calls this "theocratic election," defining it as "Israel was chosen by God to be His people."⁷

Most of the occurrences in this category simply state "My chosen people," or similar wording. This call is very subjective, but it does seem likely that particularism is a factor in many of these passages.

Only three verses (Deut. 4:37; 7:7; 10:15) give additional implications. These verses point out: (1) that God loved the nation's forefathers; (2) that His love prompted Him to choose subsequent generations; and (3) that His love was not because of the largeness of the nation. Unconditionality is likely implied in these, especially if the third point is allowed a broad application (i.e., "largeness" representing all types of conditions). Some assume irresistibility in these passages, but actually the verses are silent on that issue.

God Choosing the Messiah. This study found only one occurrence of בָּחַר in reference to Messiah election (Is. 42:1). While allowing the obvious that other passages may expand beyond what is given in this passage, this context gives no additional insight on the focus of this study. As already discussed, irresistibility is not inherent in בָּחַר , and this context indicates nothing beyond that.⁸ Concerning unconditionality and predestination, once again, there is linguistic and

⁷ Ronald V. Mitchell, "Theology 1 Class Notes," in *A Life of Lessons: The Complete Collection of Course Notes by Dr. Ronald V. Mitchell* (Conway, AR: Central Baptist College, 2008), 120. This study will follow the designations used by Ron Mitchell, differentiating between the following three types of election: Theocratic election, Messianic election and soteric election.

⁸ Some might argue that, as the Son of God, Christ could not have resisted the will of the Father. Such an argument is primarily a question of the relationship dynamics between the Father and the Son, and is not related to the question of election, per se. As such, it is beyond the scope of the current examination.

contextual silence.⁹ Particularism, however, may be implied in the first-person possessive of “my servant.”

God Choosing Other Individuals. In addition to those instances previously discussed, twenty-one occurrences of בָּחַר relate to God’s selection of individuals, with all but one referring to individual leaders or leadership roles (e.g., king or patriarch). With one exception (noted below) these passages are silent on conditionality, resistibility, and particularism.

The one exception is actually part of a trio of בָּחַר occurrences which collectively are quite revealing to the question of irresistibility and conditionality of God’s (non-soteric) election. 1 Sam 10:24 speaks of God selecting Saul to be king of Israel. Yet this passage is flanked both fore and aft (8:18 and 12:13) with verses that clearly state that it was the people of Israel that chose the king. The larger context of scripture makes it clear that, since having a king in Israel was against God’s intentions, His “election” of Saul as king was clearly against His own perfect will (1Sam 8). But God “elected” Saul as a concession to the will of the people. This highlights two significant points: God at times chooses to subjugate part of His will (thus, all that He wills is not always accomplished); and God’s “election” (e.g., Saul here) can decidedly be conditioned upon the free will choice of people (e.g., their demands in 8:19), and certainly not necessarily irresistibility thrust upon them.

As mentioned in a previous category, this study concludes that it is unwise to assume that implications from one form of election can be transferred to another. But those wishing to bring

⁹ On behalf of the Calvinists who wish to make a soteric argument from Messianic election, I momentarily expand my consideration of unconditionality beyond these linguistic and contextual factors. Was Christ chosen unconditionally (i.e., without regard for His fitness to be the sacrifice), or did He rather already meet the specified conditions and was chosen in light of that? Messianic election arguably implies the necessity of the Elected to meet the qualifications (conditions) of the needed sacrifice, thus making it conditional election.

such occurrences of רָחַץ to bear upon the discussion of soteric election must deal with no less than three problems. First, they are forced to acknowledge that God's choosing (election) does not prohibit man's free choice in that process. Second, they are required to explain how God could so foreordain the election of Saul as king when, in fact, He was opposed to Israel having a king at all – putting God's election at odds with His own will. Third, they must deal with the example that the one whom God herein selected He later rejected. Oswalt speaks to the latter in saying, "Since God carefully chooses certain ones for a specific task, he can also reject them if they deviate from that purpose (I Sam 2:27ff),"¹⁰ which undermines perseverance if soteric application is forced from this form of "election."

The above analysis accounts for the majority of רָחַץ occurrences. In addition to the five categories delineated above, other categories included God Choosing of the Priests and Levites (4 occurrences), God Choosing Other Things (8), Adjectival Use (5), and one instance of Someone Chosen by Both God and Man (1). Interestingly, this study found not a single soteric use of this term in all the OT.

Based upon these findings, רָחַץ is best understood as limited to either a generic sense of "select" or "choose" (with no implications of election), or to a theocratic, non-soteric form of election. In fact, I find the term "election" to be an inferior translation since its normal Calvinistic connotations are not representative of the term or of its contextual inferences.

And since there is no soteric usage of רָחַץ , there is no reason to presume it gives direct insight into soteric election. It would be foolish to assume that every minutia of instruction concerning circumcision of the flesh (e.g., administered only to males, administered on the eighth day after birth) is intended to transfer directly to circumcision of the heart. The same

¹⁰ Oswalt, v1: 100.

applies to directly transferring aspects of physical baptism to spiritual baptism. Likewise it is foolish to presume what is said of בְּחַרַתִּי transfers directly to soteric election. However, those that wish to read more into the meaning are faced with a mountain of additional implications – many of which are contrary to Calvinistic election – that the Bible student must grapple with without baselessly grasping and discarding implications at random.

Election Terms in the New Testament

The NT terms for election are the family of words associated with εκλέγομαι (*eklegomai*) and the rarer αἰρέομαι (*haireomai*). This study will continue by first examining the latter.

The term αἰρέομαι centers upon the act of choosing,¹¹ and its four occurrences cover a variety of scenarios. Two passages refer to the human choices (Phil 1:22, Heb 11:25), a third passage gives an OT quote concerning the Messiah (Matt 12:18), and the fourth deals with the term's sole soteric reference (2 Thes 2:13). This great variety of uses shows that Calvinistic election (in whole, or the individual aspects) is not inherent in the term, and can only be implied if contextually indicated by an individual passage.

The last passage (2Thes. 2:13) is worthy of a closer look. It points out that the individual believers (second person plural) of Thessalonica – and by extension all individual believers – have been chosen (1) from the beginning (presumably eternity past), (2) for salvation by the means of (a) sanctification by the Holy Spirit and (b) belief/trust in the truth. This passage does, therefore, indicate foreknowledge and election (in the broad sense); however it is silent concerning what that election is based upon. In other words, this passage is silent on the

¹¹ Gerhard Nordholt, "αἰρέομαι," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), v1: 533.

question of conditionality of election, and it is likewise silent on irresistibility. It does say that the Thessalonian believers (and presumably all believers) were/are specifically among the elect, but that in itself does not establish particularism.

However, the structure of the passage does indicate that believers are chosen for salvation which is obtained (a) by the Holy Spirit's sanctification and (b) by the individual's belief (trust). Since this study maintains that genuine trust must come from the heart – which is itself an active free choice of the will (as will be discussed later) – this means the salvation believers are elected to (1) is not obtained upon the person's choice alone, yet (2) is not obtained without such an active choice on his part. This arguably counters Pelagianism – the belief that man can seek and find God and salvation on his own by his mental efforts (free will) – on the one hand, and Calvinism on the other.

The Greek word ἐκλέγομαι is used much more frequently than αἰρέομαι, and carries the bulk of the weight in the theology of election. This word is the middle/passive form of the root word that literally means “to call out.” It is part of a family of common terms with definitions including “to chose something for oneself,” “to make one's choice,”¹² to choose (out), chosen, election, selection.¹³

According to Coenen, ἐκλέγομαι clearly connotes that

...the person making the choice is not tied down by any circumstances which force his hand, but is free to make his own decision. . . . Moreover, the act of choosing (and thus the words of this group) includes a judgment by the chooser as to which object he considers to be the most suitable for the fulfillment of his purpose.¹⁴

¹² G. Schrenk and G. Quell, "Ἐκλέγομαι," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967; reprint, 1993), v4: 144.

¹³ Coenen, "ἐκλέγομαι," v1: 536.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Yet to see Calvinistic unconditionality in such an explanation would be to assume more than is said, for full freedom to choose on the part of the elector in no way necessitates that he gives no thought to the condition of the elected, as Coenen goes on to show. Citing forms of εκλέγομαι used in military and political contexts, he notes, “Prudence and experience, appropriate standing in society or sufficient wealth, courage and suitability constitute the conditions necessary in each instance, if a person is to be considered for election” (emphasis added).¹⁵

Thus we find in its extra-biblical usage that εκλέγομαι, like its Hebrew counterpart קָנָה considered above, shows no inherent implications of unconditionality, and in fact imply the opposite. Likewise there are no implications of irresistibility or particularism (in the Calvinistic sense) inherent in the term.

Human Choices. Like its OT counterpart, εκλέγομαι and its derivatives are used in the NT of choices that people made. It is used of guests “picking out” the best seats (Lk 14:7), of Mary choosing to listen to Christ (Lk 10:42), of the church and its leaders selecting Paul and Barnabas to go to Antioch (Acts 15:22, 25) and of the church choosing specific men as deacons (Acts 6:5). And as with its OT equivalent, while irresistibility is not inherently implied, the condition of the chosen (e.g., the best seats, the deacons, Paul and Barnabas) was decidedly a factor in their being chosen.

Christ Choosing the Twelve. This study found six occurrences of εκλέγομαι related to Jesus’ selection of the twelve. Peterson attempts to bring these passages to bear upon the question of soteric election¹⁶ and dismissing the simple and natural default definition of “choose” (for no apparent reason). When faced with the problem of Judas being listed among these that

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Peterson, 66-67.

Jesus “elected,” Peterson makes an interpretational distinction between non-soteric and soteric election, based not upon linguistic or strictly contextual factors, but solely upon whether Judas was in the group or not. In doing so Peterson arguably allows his theology to drive his interpretation (which is less than ideal methodology).

A closer look at these passages rather shows that there is a more natural (and preferable) understanding of ἐκλέγομαι – without the linguistically and contextually unjustified connotations altering. One should note in particular John 15:16 where the use of ἀλλά (“but”) sets the selection of the disciples by Christ in apposition to the (negative) selection of Christ by the disciples. The two uses of ἐκλέγομαι are identical (except for the person and number as necessitated by the reversal of subject and object), contextually equating the two. In other words, Christ’s selection of the disciples carries no deeper implications than when the same verb is used (in a negative sense) of the disciples’ selection of Christ. In short, both verbs appear to be simple non-election uses of ἐκλέγομαι, best understood as a form of “choose” and nothing more. Such a default interpretation is equally fitting throughout John’s gospel and the two uses by Luke (Lk 6:13, Acts 1:2) as well. This category (Christ selecting the disciples), therefore, gives no contextual implications of either of the Calvinistic aspects of unconditionality or irresistibility. However, there is a sense of particularism in the choosing of the twelve (including Judas), but in a general sense that is understood in all forms of selecting.

God Choosing Christ. This study found four instances of ἐκλέγομαι used in reference to Messianic election – of God choosing Christ (Lk 9:35, 23:35; 1Pet 2:4, 6). Peterson makes a big point of God’s election of Christ.¹⁷ Yet in doing so he inadvertently points out an important fact already mentioned: One must differentiate between the different types of election, understanding

¹⁷ Ibid., 157-162.

that all one area implies does not necessarily directly transfer to another. Unquestionably the Messiah was chosen (elect) of God. Yet does that Messianic election warrant superimposing all aspects of soteric election to Him? Does one dare to force the need of salvation upon the Messiah – transferring what is plainly taught in soteric election into Messianic election? Of course there is no justification for such error. Thus is shown the theological danger in assuming transferability of any aspect of one type of election to another. Each form of election should be analyzed and understood as a separate area of study, requiring independent Biblical basis for all aspects of its theology.

Getting back to the findings of this category, this study did determine that these occurrences do not address unconditionality or irresistibility. The question of particularism is open for interpretation, but like in the OT equivalent this study is inclined to think that it is implied.

“Elect” as Reference to the Saved. The most frequent use of ἐκλέγομαι was a designation for or reference to the saved, with nearly 50% of all occurrences belonging to this category. Yet of the twenty-one occurrences, nearly two-thirds (thirteen instances) only note the fact of there being an elect, and three more (Col 3:12, 1Pet 2:9, James 2:5) give no particular help to the discussion at hand. More specifically, these sixteen passages are silent on the issue of conditionality, irresistibility or particularism of election.

One of the remaining five passages, Matt 22:14, states that “many are called, but few are chosen,” which at first blush seems to support Calvinistic election (and esp. particularism). But “chosen” (like “called” before it) is not a passive verb as English seems to imply, but is rather an adjective. But what is implied in the adjectival label of “chosen” here? The answer is given as the parable shows the adjective affixed to those who received the invitation, willingly accepted it

in a timely fashion, and followed due process required in accepting that invitation (i.e., being appropriately robed, most likely provided by the host (as per customs of the day¹⁸)).

Contextually, these “chosen” are not contrasted with one who was invited but not allowed to attend (as would illustrate Calvinistic election), but rather with one that attempted to attend by side-stepping the due process required by the master.

Additionally the parable indicates that the master’s instructions to his servants were to give a genuine invitation to “as many as you can find.” It also clearly implies that all were free to reject the invitation if they so chose. So instead of teaching particularism, this parable rather implies a genuine general invitation which all are free to accept or reject, and that one’s ultimate chosen-ness is based upon his free response to that general call. The truths illustrated in this parable are about as un-Calvinistic as one can get.

In the second passage (2Tim 2:10) Paul states that he endured all things “in order that [the chosen/elect] may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus” (emphasis added).

Arguably this implies that the subjunctive “may obtain [salvation]” was dependent upon the enduring that Paul did (presumably in his efforts to share the gospel (v9)). By Calvinistic standards, salvation that is in any way dependent upon actions of man is conditional, necessitating in turn that the election to that salvation must be conditional. Thus this verse in which Paul stated that the salvation of others was conditioned upon his efforts seems to clearly undermine the Calvinistic stance on the unconditionality of election.

The third remaining verse is 2Pet 1:10, which speaks of the need to be diligent to make certain (sure, stable) one’s calling and choosing (election). While a sense of soteric election is certainly implied, no further implications are given. As in so many other verses, there is no

¹⁸ Ralph Gower and Fred Wight, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), 69.

implication of unconditionality, particularism, or irresistibility. And silence neither supports nor discredits either side of the issue.

The remaining two scriptures which deal with “election” in reference to the saved are Eph 1:7 and Rom 11:7. These are part of larger passages that will be examined shortly.

Additional Brief Word Studies

Before considering the major passages on election this study must first consider two additional pertinent NT terms, foreknow (προγινώσκω (*proginoskō*)), predestine (προορίζω (*pro-orizō*)) and call (καλέω (*kaleō*)).

Foreknow. A key point in the election – free will debate is the meaning of God’s foreknowledge. Προγινώσκω is a compound word whose two components mean “before” and “to know.” Lexical sources define this family of words as to know beforehand, know in advance, foreknowledge, advance knowledge.¹⁹

Citing Biblical examples where one component (γινώσκω, (*ginoskō*, “to know”)) is used euphemistically for sexual relations, Calvinists often argue that the “know” portion of God’s foreknowing means “love.” Thus, they conclude, God’s foreknowledge connotes that He pre-loved the elect – i.e., He set His mind to (unconditionally, irresistibly, and particularly) love them in eternity past. But there are a number of legitimate objections to such an interpretation. First, there is no sexual implication in foreknowledge for which the euphemistic “know” should be used. Second, a brief examination of occurrences of γινώσκω revealed no instance in which it implied love apart from sexual implications. There are differing levels of recognition and

¹⁹ P. Jacobs and H. Krienke, "Foreknowledge, Providence, Predestination," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), v1: 692; and Rudolf Bultmann, "προγινώσκω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967; reprint, 1993), v1: 715-716.

comprehension implied in the various occurrences. But recognition and comprehension are not equivalent to love, for a good strategist will seek to “know” (i.e., recognize and comprehend his way of thinking and acting) without any sense of love or concern. Thus, (1) there is insufficient reason found to warrant an interpretation of “love” in γινώσκω, and (2) there is no basis for superimposing one nuance of the very general γινώσκω into its more specific derivative προγινώσκω.

Third, such use of προγινώσκω is not in keeping with the specific nature of the word itself or all its NT occurrences. Among its NT uses, προγινώσκω is found in Acts 26:5 where Paul related that the Pharisees who wanted to kill him “προγινώσκοντές με.” It is inconceivable to interpret this phrase as they “fore-loved me” (as Calvinists argue is an acceptable interpretation of προγινώσκω), whereas “knew me before” is clearly the intended meaning. Peter (2Pet 3:17) likewise uses προγινώσκω in a way that cannot mean “fore-loved.” However, each and every NT occurrence of προγινώσκω is readily understandable using the basic connotation of pre-cognition or “to know before.” To force an alternate meaning without contextual justification is not good exegetical methodology, and no such contextual justification was found in passages such as Rom 8:29, 11:2,²⁰ upon which such Calvinists’ alterations are often forced.

Revisiting 2Pet 3:17, it is worthy of note that this passage speaks of believers’ foreknowledge of the coming return of Christ. Examining this in light of the purpose of the present study, one must ask if such foreknowledge irresistibly foreordains the event (as per Calvinists’ understanding of the working of foreknowledge). It seems far more plausible that it

²⁰ Cottrell concurs with these findings, and gives an excellent discussion: Jack W. Cottrell, “The Classic Arminian View of Election,” in *Perspectives on Election: Five Views*, ed. Chad Brand (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 88-89.

is rather the event (set by the choice of God) that gives rise to the human foreknowledge, even though the foreknowledge pre-dates the event. One must therefore conclude that the term προγινώσκω has no inherent sense of dictating the future. Furthermore, this term unquestionably supports the possibility of the future establishing one's foreknowledge.

Predestine. The Greek προορίζω is a compound word which basically means to decide, limit or determine beforehand; to foreordain.²¹ There are only six occurrences of προορίζω in the NT. Rom 8:29, 30 speak of God's predestination of believers to be conformed to the image of Christ, and Eph 1:5, 11 speak of predestination to adoption and an inheritance – all of which arguably have soteric implications. However, neither these nor the two non-soteric contexts (Acts 4:28 and 1Cor 2:7) specifically delve into the basis or criteria for any form of predestination. There is nothing inherent in either the word's connotation or the passages' contexts which necessitates (or even hints) that predestination is unconditional, which in turn speaks to both irresistibility and particularism. If conditionality is not repudiated then neither is resistibility since one can refuse to meet the condition. Also particularism is left open to debate since each one is potentially left to choose to meet the condition or not.

Call. The Greek word καλέω (*kaleō*) is the equivalent to the English "to call," and can connote a similar range of meanings. The previously discussed Matt 22:14 ("many are called, but few are chosen") uses the adjective form of καλέω in the sense of "to invite" (cf. v3, 4 which give the verb form with the same nuance). The word can also connote a command, as of a superior demanding the presence of a subordinate. In addition to these, there are other equally valid connotations, e.g., "the giving of a name or nickname, . . . or the attribution of a particular

²¹ Jacobs and Krienke, v1: 695; and K. L. Schmidt, "προορίζω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967; reprint, 1993), v5: 456.

rank.”²² These nuances are paralleled in the English “call,” as a boy calls to his friend to come and play (inviting), the military calls up a soldier for duty (commanding), and a mother calls her newborn, “Sarah” (naming). Distinctions between nuances must be determined by context, and the intended nuance is sometimes unclear.

An Examination of Major Passages on Election

This study will now consider in some depth the most pivotal passages used in support of Calvinistic election. These loosely correspond to what Peterson calls “the three most important Pauline texts on election:”²³ Rom 8:29-30; Rom 9:6-24 (which is here expanded to include most of chapters 9-11); Eph 1:4-5, 11.

Romans 8. One of the largest battlegrounds in the election debate – both in passage size and the extent of discussion – is Romans 8-11. Within this larger battlefield are three primary front lines that will be considered separately: Romans 8:29-30, Romans 9 and Romans 11:1-7.

To properly exegete the intended message of Rom 8:29-30 requires that one first consider the contextual setting. The passage does mention soteric election, so it does speak to the primary question of this study. However, it must be noted that the principle focus of the passage is hope and assurance to suffering saints and not election per se. And as already established, care must be exercised in such cases to not read unintended implications into the passage, and especially into its silence.

Peterson notes that v29-30 are this passage’s pivotal verses relative to the Calvinistic argument. To examine the full context, however, one must begin as early as v17 where the topic of suffering as children of God is introduced. Paul discusses suffering among believers and in

²² L. Coenen, “καλέθ,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 273-74.

²³ Peterson, 85.

the whole creation (v17-23), the hope that perseveres in suffering (v24-25), and the Spirit's help in suffering (v26-27). Verse 28 then accents that God causes all things – with an implied inclusion on the current subject (suffering) – to work for the good of those suffering believers (as well as all the saved). Verses 31-39 continue Paul's "pep talk" to the suffering, including the truths that God's support is greater than anyone or anything that might stand against the believers (v31); nothing can separate believers from Christ (v38-39) or His love (v35); and believers are 'super-conquerors' (v37).

Three particular issues will be considered before taking a closer examination of the whole of v29-30. First is the question of whether the listed items are given in a chronological order, with each subsequent element temporally following and based upon the previous one. The argument offered by some Calvinists seems to be based upon such a perspective: First God foreknew, and then the ones that He foreknew He predestined, and then the ones that He predestined He called. . . . But such a temporal progression is not specifically stated or necessarily implied in the passage, nor is it necessary to accomplish the purpose of the context (e.g., comforting the suffering believers). The passage could instead be intended as a chain of items in a logical progression (or no progression at all), where temporal chronology is a non-issue. As an example of non-temporal logical progression someone could reason as follows: If a person is the CEO of a major business then he has a huge salary; and if he has a huge salary then he has a big personal investment portfolio; and if he has such a portfolio he has income tax attorneys; and if he has income tax attorneys he knows the pain of dealing with lawyers. All of these items are given in a logical progression without necessarily implying any temporal sequence of events. To this student a logical progression, or even a non-progressive listing of contextually applicable items, is superior to a temporal-progression understanding of v29-30.

The concept of God having to make decisions in temporal progression (e.g., He first foreknew, then He subsequently predestined) seems inconsistent with the characteristics of One who has arguably always known and willed that which He has ever known and willed. Thus, this study considers this listing to be a non-temporal progression of items and deems conclusion built upon such a progression unsupported by this passage.

The second issue concerns the tense of the verbs used in these two verses. Peterson comments, “Paul employs five simple past-tense (aorist) verbs to depict God’s deeds.”²⁴ Peterson is correct that the verbs are aorist tense, and that the aorist tense typically – but not always – depicts past action. While the first two verbs (“foreknew” and “predestined”) were arguably accomplished in eternity past (i.e., “past tense”), it is quite obvious that the last two – and possibly three (depending on one’s interpretation) – verbs (“glorified,” “justified,” and possibly “called”) have not yet been accomplished for all the elect. Thus, instead of the more typical past-tense use of the aorist, it seems rather that this could be the rarer gnomic aorist which is “. . . occasionally used to present a timeless, general fact. . . . [I]t does not refer to a particular event that *did* happen, but to a generic event that *does* happen. Normally, it is translated like a simple present tense.”²⁵ If this is the sense that Paul intended – as seems more fitting to the passage – then the list of five verbs present timeless truths and not past actions. As Wallace indicates, the present tense would be the preferable English rendering to convey these ideas. (See below.)

This leads to the third item to be considered: the meaning of “call.” It is often assumed, especially among the writing Calvinists, that the calling in this passage connotes a beckoning or

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996), 562.

command, as one would demand the presence of a subordinate. This study questions the validity of that assumption that rules out other possibilities without warrant. Is it not also possible – and possibly more fitting to both the immediate context and the broader context of scripture (Is 61:2; Rev 2:17) – that this is rather a sense of naming, as a father would give his name to a newly born or newly adopted son? At the least, it seems there is no reason to discount the possibility of such a connotation of κἀλέω in this passage.

Now this study will consider these verses in whole. With these key verses sandwiched in the middle of an immediate context which offers assistance for the suffering saints, one proceeds on the assumption that the timeless truths of v29-30 are also purposed to offer a similar support. To paraphrase (with implied meanings inserted), Paul’s discourse arguably goes like this:

28. We know that God makes good come from all circumstances [which includes suffering] for those that love Him [like you do] and are, in accordance with [His] purpose, [already] the called/named/ranked²⁶ ones [which, again, you are].
29. [And we can know that God causes good to come from all circumstances...] Because everyone who He knows [from] before-times [i.e., the saved, including you], He also predetermines that they were to be conformed to Christ-likeness....
30. And those who He so predetermines He also calls/names/gives rank to [– and I already said that you are called ones (v28) so all this applies to you –], and the ones He calls/names/gives rank to He justifies [which He is accomplishing in you, in part, through this suffering], and the ones He justifies He glorifies [as He will one day do with you].
31. So what can we say? If God is for us [as seen by all this which He works in the lives of the elect], then [by comparison] whoever or whatever might be against us [including your present suffering] doesn’t amount to anything.

This study deems this expanded paraphrase, though bulky and cumbersome, to be the gist of the intentions of this passage. The verses in question (v29-30) build item upon item to this climax: All that God is doing in His workings with His people – from eternity past to eternity future – give the suffering believers every reason to be encouraged and to carry on.

²⁶ “Called” here is an adjective (indicating a description), not a passive verb (which would imply being acted upon). See earlier discussion of “call” for an explanation of interpretations.

While this passage speaks of the elect, its purpose is to give support to the suffering elect, not to describe the process of election. This study deems that an attempt to ascertain the particular aspects of Calvinistic election and its process from this passage is to push the passage beyond its intended message.

Romans 9. Moving from chapter eight to chapter nine presents another passage many Calvinists are quick to claim in support of Calvinistic election. On the other hand, some non-Calvinists may have been over-reactive to those claims, dismissing this passage too quickly as non-soteric. Since Paul begins the discussion in this section (chapters 9-11) by expressing his earnest desire for his fellow Jews' salvation, salvation is obviously involved in this passage to some extent, and non-Calvinists are at fault in dodging it.

Chapter 9 begins with Paul sharing his deep yearning for the salvation of his countrymen. "But," one might ask, "how is it possible that as God's chosen people the Jews are not saved? God hasn't failed, has He?" (v6a). Paul frames his answer by differentiating between theocratic election and soteric election, and illustrating the latter by the former.

These distinctions are seen in v8-13 as Paul contrasts the children of the flesh (i.e., all biological descendents) with children of the promise in Israel's own history, with God showing love (v11-13, also called mercy in v15) on the one brother (Jacob) while hating (relatively; cf. Lk 14:26) the other. The point made here is that the difference in God's dealing with the soteric elect and non-elect Jews in Paul's day is consistent with His handling of the theocratic elect and non-elect in the days of their forefathers. The reason behind the present difference is not fully spelled out at this point, but it is hinted at it when Paul says it was "God's purpose" and "not because of works" (v11) – with "works" already established in this epistle as that which is contrasted to faith (Rom 3:20-4:6).

“But it isn’t fair” – Paul anticipates the objection of others (v14) – “that God should save some of ‘His people’ (theocratic sense) while allowing their brothers to perish!” Paul responds with God’s words to Moses, showing that there is no injustice (v14) when God has mercy and compassion (v15) on one person that is above that which He gives to another (cf. the parable of the workers in the field (Matt 20)). God was not unfair to Esau in providing additional blessings to Jacob, nor is He unfair to ethnic Israel in saving the remnant while allowing others to perish.

Verse 16 draws a conclusion from the previous verses: That something (subject is not stated) is not the result of willing or working, but of God’s mercy. The subject is arguably the distinction between the elect and non-elect (which has been the subject of the whole discussion), but that forces the question of which of the two elections – theocratic election among the forefathers, or soteric election among the Jews of Paul’s day – does Paul have in mind. The answer to that question hinges upon the intentions of v14. Is it a response only to the extended discussion of the theocratic election in v6b-13, or does it include the broader discussion of soteric-election distinction among the Jews that the theocratic election is set forth to illustrate? This study deems the context (including the present-tense participles of v16) to suggest both forms of election are intended. If both types of election are here in the mind of Paul, v16 could functionally be understood as:

So then, [election] [is] not of the one willing nor of the one running, *but* [rather] of the one showing the mercy ([i.e.,] God).

With the subject determined, the implications of the genitive/ablatives (the three “of s” in the above rendering) must now be addressed. The genitive of production – i.e., where “of” is replaced with “produced by”²⁷ – seems fitting to the intentions of the verse, and would indicate that election is not the product of a person’s will or his effort, but it is the product of God’s

²⁷ Wallace, 104-05.

mercy. This would disallow the extreme forms of free will theology (e.g., Pelagianism), yet does not go so far as to counter free will theology that believes God provides the salvation but allows man the freedom to accept or reject it (e.g., to trust/believe).²⁸

Verses 17 and 18 are directly connected to the same thought as v16 (note “for” and “so”). Pharaoh, like Esau, is given as one God chose to disregard – and in Pharaoh’s case God even to the point of destroying him. In response to those that hold that this verse supports Calvinistic election, note that while the ultimate outcome of Pharaoh’s destruction is specified (i.e., that God’s name might be proclaimed), the verse is silent concerning factors behind God’s choosing Pharaoh to accomplish that purpose – and the Bible student has no justification for confusing desired outcome with contributing factors. The outcome of World War II Audie Murphy’s battlefield heroism was international acclaim, but it is presumptuous to accredit that outcome as the sole factor (or any factor at all, for that matter) in his acts of heroism. Similarly, God choice to demonstrate His power through Pharaoh’s destruction in no way implies that other factors – e.g., the pride and rebellion of Pharaoh as evidenced in his repeated disregard for God’s demands – were not factors in His making that choice. In short, this passage cannot legitimately be construed to support Calvinistic reprobation (i.e., God’s foreordination of individuals to eternal destruction, disallowing them an opportunity for salvation).

In verses 19-21 Paul argues God’s justification in the above matters by an illustration of a potter. The potter is able at his own decision to make from “the same lump” (illustrating all Israel) both vessels for special honor (the saved remnant) and vessels for common (literally,

²⁸ Some might assume that the genitive of production, which assigns election as the product of God’s mercy and not man’s will, disallows man’s free will in accepting or rejecting election. Such an understanding over-stretches the intention of the genitive’s meaning, for Wallace also cites “the unity of the Spirit” (Eph. 4:3) as another genitive of production (ibid.), yet the production of unity by the Spirit obviously does not imply that man is unable to accept or reject such unity when offered.

“without special honor”) use (the remainder of ethnic Israel). Paul simply states that the potter is able to choose as he wills, but makes no hint at the reason for the distinction.

Based upon the lesson of the potter, Paul (v22-24) states that God patiently endured vessels of wrath which had “‘fitted’ themselves” (middle voice)²⁹ for destruction (ethnic Israel, and possibly others) in order that He might make known His glorious riches upon the vessels of mercy (the saved, both from Israel and the Gentiles (v 24)).³⁰ The passage does not yet delineate the reason the vessels of wrath (ethnic Israel) were made fit for destruction beyond the implications that they brought it upon themselves if the middle voice of the verb is accepted.

The remainder of the chapter explains the OT prophecies that the larger portion of Israel would be lost, a remnant of Israel would remain, that from among “those who are not my people” will God call some “my people.” What will allow this addition of a new group? It will be attained by a righteousness which comes from faith (v30). Why will many who were previously called God’s people (ethnic Israel) fall away? “Because they did not pursue [righteousness] through faith” (v32). A lack of faith (belief, trust) is the reason behind – and arguable the instrument of – ethnic Israel’s being fitted (or fitting themselves) for destruction (v22) as vessels of wrath. (This lack of trust or faith also explains the destruction that came upon the illustrative Pharaoh (v17), for he had shown a lack of faith in hardening his own heart prior to God actively hardening it.) One’s faith is the pivotal factor in the distinction between theocratically elected Israel and soterically elected Israel, ultimately answering the question of

²⁹ W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words: With Their Precise Meanings for English Readers*, 4 vols in 1. (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., n.d.), v2: 106.

³⁰ It is worthy of note that these are “vessels of mercy” which God “prepared before,” (προητοιμαζω (*proetoimazō*)). However, as indicated by the only other NT occurrence of this word (Eph. 2:10), such preparation does not imply irresistibility.

v6a. Additionally God's purpose (v11), God's choice (v11), and the children of God's promise are all integrally tied to the exercise of faith. Thus faith, not the elements of Calvinistic election, is shown in this chapter to be what differentiates between the soteric elect and the non-soteric-elect.

Romans 11. Chapter 10 forwards Christ as the real object of saving faith – a faith which is equally accessible to Jews and Gentiles alike. Paul then returns to focus upon the Jews in chapter 11. In v1 he asks if God has rejected His people (ethnic Israel), to which he answers, “Never!” He then expounds upon that answer (v2) using the same distinctions he made in chapter 9: God has not rejected “those He foreknew” (the saved) that are among Israel. In v2b-4 Paul then illustrates that fact with the OT example of Elijah.

Pressing the OT illustration upon the present, in v5 Paul states that there has come to presently be a remnant (children of promise) according to [the] choice/selection of grace (in opposition to works, v6). Verse 7 shows that what ethnic Israel sought, they did not (as a whole) obtain; rather the chosen (i.e., children of promise) within the whole did obtain it, but the remainder (children of the flesh) were hardened. This is still within the same general context as chapter 9, and it follows that the hardening here is part of the same process as the being fitted (or fitting themselves) for destruction in 9:22 – with both the fitting and the hardening caused by the lack of faith noted in 9:32.³¹

Verse 5 also notes that the remnant / chosen (children of promise) are present “according to [the] choice / election of grace.” Chapter 9 has already established that faith (trust, believing) is what distinguishes individuals in this group from the rest of ethnic Israel. Merging the two

³¹ Granted, 11:8 speaks of God giving them a spirit of stupor..., but that is explainable by either: (1) ‘God giving them over to...’ in the sense of passive allowing or actively removing restraints against such a spirit (e.g. the evil spirit that God gave King Saul (1Sam 16:14ff)); or (2) God enacting a “reap what you have sown” principle.

Biblical concepts, God's election is working hand in hand with the exercise of the believers' trust – not to imply the two are equal partners, but arguably as the former sovereignly designed in such a way that the final outcome is dependent upon the latter. It is clear from these two chapters that election is produced by God's initiative apart from man, but its actualization is dependent upon the individual exercising his trust.

To close this extended consideration of Romans 9-11, two particular observations will be mentioned. First, the pivotal factor appears to be the choice to believe (trust, faith) in Rom 9:30. From this believing righteousness is obtained and the children of promise are determined (following the pattern of Abraham (cf. Gal 3:6)). Lacking this faith the children of the flesh perish under the judgment of God (after the example of Pharaoh). Trust (faith, believing) – not election, either in whole or its various components – is the key to the distinctions in this passage.

Second, the whole tone of Paul's heart arguably runs counter to Calvinistic election. Paul expresses the anguish of his heart in the first few verses of chapter 9, then states that his prayer to God is that Israel might be saved (10:1). The whole tone is not of one that is convinced of God's irresistible foreordination that has irreversibly set the one's eternal outcome in stone. Rather, it is of one that, with full knowledge of what God's foreknowledge, predestination, calling, etc. entail, nevertheless prayed that his fellow Israelites "might be saved." Twist that as one's intellectual arguments might try, the heart of the passage is nothing less than Paul praying for something that "might" (implying possibility) happen, even within the bounds of God's election. That alone should be sufficient to convince one of the shortcomings of Calvinistic election.

Ephesians 1. Attention is now turned to a brief consideration of Eph 1:4-5, 11. These verses state,

...just as [God] chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through

Jesus Christ to himself, according to the kind intention of His will. . . . [In Him] also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will. . . . (NASB)

The passage states that God “chose (elected) us before the foundation of the world,” but this raises a number of the pivotal questions. What were the criteria for choosing? The broad nature of *εκλέγομαι* (*eklegomai*, “to choose”) does not provide any insight, and one is forced to acknowledge that this specific passage simply doesn’t say, which once again offers support for neither side of the debate.

To whom is “us” referring? Some consider it to be those that believe; others would say it is those that God, for purposes known only to Him, decided to choose with total disregard of the person’s conditionality. But “us” is a reference to individuals that have already been saved – Paul and the “saints who are at Ephesus” – but is silent about what factors allowed them to be included in that grouping.

The time of this choosing was “before the foundation of the world,” but does this necessarily imply an irresistible foreordination? Without knowing the criteria for the selection – which this passage is silent about – it is impossible to say.

Who is predestined? While it is obviously the same “us,” here again the passage only states that the already saved are included, but without insight into the criteria for their being among the predestined. Certainly the passage shows that the predestination is according to God’s will (v5) and purpose (v11), but what is that will and purpose? Is it some “hidden” will that man is unable to ascertain, or is some factor that is elsewhere spelled out in scripture? The passage is silent on that issue.

God works all things after the counsel of His will, but what is that will? Once again, the scripture doesn’t say.

Since this passage is time and again silent about the aspects of Calvinistic election, one is forced to concede that this passage is not given for the purpose of substantiating such matters. It rather focuses on God's long-standing choice (v4a) and the goal of that choice (v4b); His love which predetermines the adoption as His children (v5a), including the means for adoption (v5b); and even giving an inheritance (v11) – all these great things for “us” who are already saved.

Summary

Based upon the study of the families of Hebrew and Greek terms for “election” and their usage, this study concludes:

1. The default meaning for these terms is a simple sense of selection or choosing, without any deeper theological implications. Therefore a form of “choose” or “select” or comparable synonym should be the normal translation of these terms unless otherwise required by the context. This study finds that the Calvinists' tendency to arbitrarily translate these terms as “elect” or “election” in an attempt to imply deeper theological ramifications is often unwarranted and artificial.
2. These terms have no inherent connotations of the Calvinistic election aspects of irresistibility, unconditionality, or particularism. (In fact, both Biblical and extra-Biblical uses often imply the opposite.) Therefore, any such implications must be established by the contexts of individual passages, not assumed in the nuance of the terms themselves.
3. A very large percentage of occurrences of these terms relating to soteric election are actually contextually silent on the particular aspects of Calvinistic election. Such silence cannot be legitimately argued as either supporting or discrediting either side of the debate. These passages simply establish that there is a soteric form of election – nothing more.

4. The few passages which speak to the Calvinistic aspects do not support irresistibility or unconditionality. This study further concludes that a degree of particularism is implied in some passages; but within the soteric passages it is limited to the normal inference inherent to any choosing, but with no Calvinistic overtones. Schrenk speaks to this, although focused on a more limited scope: “In particular εκλέγεσθαι is not adapted to serve as the basis of a dogma of [Calvinistic] election and reprobation. It is unfortunate that the concept of election has been linked with the predestinarian controversy.”³² This study concurs, findings the same true of all aspects of Calvinistic election in all election terms considered.

In short, based upon its findings this study must conclude that the Biblical terms and their various passages give no basis for a Calvinistic understanding of election, but rather appear to support an theology of salvation that is conditional, resistible and generally offered. These will be developed further as this study progresses.

Free Will

Having completed an exegetical study of election, this study now examines the issue of free will. Like election, the boundaries and even definition of free will have been argued through the centuries – ranging from fatalism which assumes man has no free will to Pelagianism which believes man’s free will is nearly boundless. This student’s personal definition of free will dovetails with Erasmus who said, “By freedom of the will we understand . . . the power of the human will whereby man can apply to or turn away from that which leads unto eternal salvation,”³³ – although with the phrase, “once God has drawn him,” suffixed for clarity.

³² Schrenk and Quell, 175.

³³ Erasmus, "The Free Will," in *Discourse on Free Will*, ed. Ernst F. Winter (New York: Continuum, 1999), 20.

However, the nature of this study's discussion requires that the expression be used to cover the broader range of meanings as well.

A couple of factors come into play in a Biblical study of free will. Unlike the term "election, "free will" (as used in the debate) is not specifically found in the Bible. As such word meanings are more than a simple lexical study and occurrence studies are not an easy concordance look-up. Instead the words and occurrences must be studied under the more general term "will."

The second factor is that man's ability to exercise his will, especially within Calvinistic thought, is more the "left-overs" not consumed by God's will, rather than an item to be studied on its own. In order to provide as comprehensive a study as possible, this study will examine both God's will and man's will, attempting to identify any stated and implied limitations that the former places upon the latter.

Will in the Old Testament

In the haystack of OT occurrences of the word "will" (in all forms and meanings), this study identified four applicable "needles."

Making reference to the power that Pharaoh gave to Joseph Ps 105:22 states, "To imprison his princes at will. . . ." The Hebrew word is נֶפֶשׁ (*nephesh*), whose primary meaning is breathe or life, but is variously interpreted as one's soul, mind, heart, pleasure or desire.³⁴ But this is a very rare connotation of a very frequently used word, and has no significant impact on this study.

A second OT word for will, the Aramaic *reuwth*, is found exclusively in Ezra (two occurrences). It is used in a decree by Artaxerxes, stating that the materials at Ezra's and the

Jews' disposal, "you may do according to the will of your God" (Ezra 7:18). The same word is used in Ezra 5:17, and is translated as "pleasure" (KJV) and "decision" (NASB). Strong's Concordance notes that this word corresponds to רַעֲוֹת³⁵ (*re'uwth*), which is itself used only in Ecclesiastes (seven instances) of the "vexation" of spirit. This word is deemed to play no role in the question at hand.

Another Aramaic term, *tseba'*, has ten occurrences which are isolated to the book of Daniel. The definitions for this term include to desire, to be inclined, to be willing, to be pleased.³⁶ Nine of the ten occurrences are in the story of Nebuchadnezzar's insanity, denoting both the sovereignty of God's will (4:17, 25, 32, 35; 5:21) and the sovereignty of Nebuchadnezzar's rule as king (5:19 (four times)). The final occurrence (7:19) speaks of Daniel's "desire" (NASB) to understand the meaning of a portion of prophecy. Thus, this term which contextually gives the strongest OT expression of the sovereignty of God's will over man, (1) equally shows a subordinate but nonetheless sovereign (free) will in man, and (2) is also used contextually of one's desire.

The fourth OT word is רַצֵּן (*ratsōn*), occurring 56 times and meaning goodwill, favor, acceptance, will.³⁷ The term has such a broad spectrum of uses it is difficult to determine much specific about it. Its various uses include occurrences with either God or man as its subject, and is given with a host of objects (God, man, sacrifice, personal appetites, just weights, Zion, etc.).

³⁴ James Strong, "A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Hebrew Bible," in *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 80.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁶ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, 1108.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 953.

It is also used adjectivally (e.g., “acceptable time”). The term variously connotes God’s will (per se), God’s favor, man’s will (per se), man’s desire, general acceptance.

Will in the New Testament

In the NT “will” is built primarily around the word groups of θέλω (*thelō*) and βούλομαι (*boulomai*). Müller defines θέλω with meanings like wish, want, desire, will, take pleasure in; intention.³⁸ Schrenk’s definitions include, “to be ready or inclined;” “the motive of desire;” “[i]ntention;” “resolve, decision and choice;” “will;” and “desire, wish.”³⁹ Schrenk does make some effort to limit the meanings when used with God⁴⁰, but offers no justification for varying from the normal Biblical and extra-Biblical range of meanings. One is forced to wonder if theology is driving his interpretation instead of vice versa.

Müller defines the family of βούλομαι with terms like to will, wish, want, desire; resolve, purpose; intention.⁴¹ Concerning this word Schrenk notes, “In most of the NT passages, . . . the sense is that of ‘wishing,’ ‘desiring’ or ‘intending,’ often with something of all three (27 times out of a total of 37).”⁴² Thus βούλομαι is a multifaceted word having a wide range of nuances.

Some people attempt to make significant distinctions between θέλω and βούλομαι, but Müller disagrees. “A clear terminological distinction between *boulomai* (originally volition as a

³⁸ Dietrich Müller, “Will,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), v3: 1018.

³⁹ G. Schrenk, “θέλω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967; reprint, 1993), 44-46, 53.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 47-52.

⁴¹ Müller, v3: 1015.

⁴² G. Schrenk, “βούλομαι,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967; reprint, 1993), v1: 632.

mental act) and *thelō* (originally instinctive desire) . . . is excluded at the time of the NT by their largely synonymous usage.”⁴³

In addition to the two main word families just mentioned, this study also found thirteen occurrences from three other word families: ἔκον (*hekon*, 3 instances), εὐδοκία (*eudokia*, 9), and εὐνοίας (*eunoias*, 1). Word meanings for these are similar to the previous words.

This study examined 317 NT occurrences of these will-related words. Each occurrence was then categorized by the subject and type of the will and then examined for contextual implications. The subjects were found to be humans (199 occurrences / 63% of total); God (77 / 24%); Christ (34 / 11%); and creation, the dead, the Devil, an event, the Spirit, and wind (2 or less occurrences each). The contextually implied connotations were simple desire (203 / 64%); intention (29 / 9%); consent (14 / 4%); and accept, kindness, and pleasing (each with less than 5 occurrences). Analysis of both subject and connotation distribution among the various Greek words indicates no solid identifiable pattern. Will associated with God does seem to favor the noun θέλημα, but since human will stands out as equally prominent in the verb form (θέλω) these tendencies were assumed to be of no significance.

The observant reader may have noticed that the connotational breakdown in the previous paragraph falls considerably short of 100%. This is because in 63 occurrences (20%) this study was not able to immediately ascertain the specific implied meaning. Of those 63, there are 53 which deal with God’s will. For example Matt 12:50 states, "For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother." Does “will” here mean God’s intention, or is it His desire? Or consider Acts 18:21, “but [Paul] taking leave of them and saying, ‘I will return to you again if God wills,’ he set sail from Ephesus.” Does this reference

⁴³ Müller, v3: 1015.

imply God's intended plan, or simply his consent to Paul's request? Yet even such a large percentage of indeterminate meanings does not change the relatively huge preference (83% of the occurrences with discernable implications) for understanding will as a simple desire. And for many of the undetermined instances such an understanding of will works quite well.

Of special note to this study, "God's will" covers a wide range of meanings, implying desire, consent, and intention. A single meaning (e.g., eternal intention or plan) cannot be assumed as a given for every occurrence of the expression or even the default. (See Appendix A for an expanded consideration of the various meanings to the expression "will of God.") Certainly the Calvinist's theory that "that which God wills He does" – which seemingly presumes a single connotation in all the references to God's will – stands in stark contrast to this study's findings.

Also of note is that the Bible speaks freely and frequently of the will of man – outnumbering references to God's will at a surprising five-to-two ratio. And the contextual connotations applied to man's will run nearly the same gamut as those implied for God, and show man in free exercise of his will. Those that claim that God's foreknowledge of the future disallows man's free choice are hard pressed to justify that claim in light of all the Biblical references to man's exercising of his own will. This study concludes that this item alone is enough to refute such an understanding of foreknowledge.

A few specific will-related passages are worthy of note. A verse commonly used by Calvinists to discount human will is Phil 2:13: "God ... is at work in you...to will...for [His] good pleasure." But Paul here uses a present tense verb addressed to the saved, and thus whatever the phrase means it does not target soteric election.

The verse also begs the question of which nuance of “will” is intended. This student feels that simple desire is likely meant, implying that God influences the desire and does not speak to the decision, *per se*. This would make the verse a non-issue in the debate. However, those who understand will as decision instead of desire should note this: Even if God influences the will as this verse implies, the final yes-no decision is still stated as “you[r] . . . will.” This study maintains that an irresistible decision is by definition not a decision of one’s will and is contrary to the tone and intention of this passage.

In Mk 14:36 and parallel passages Jesus prayed to God, “...yet not what I will, but what You [will].” Interestingly, the perfect, sinless Jesus had a will that was different than His Father’s. Note that this demands that this will of Christ be understood as simple desire, not determined plan of the heart, for the latter would put Him at odds with His Father, which would be sin.

Also note that the second “will” (that of God) is not actually given but is required to be supplied as a duplicate of the earlier “will.” This requires that the two wills have the same connotations, and since Christ’s will is simple desire (as concluded above), then God’s will here must be simple desire as well. Thus, this verse shows the invalidity of reading a sense of “foreordained plan” into every instance of God’s will.

In Lk 13:34 Jesus speaks to the Jews, personified as Jerusalem. He tells of His will ($\theta\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\omega$) to gather them to Him, but they would (also $\theta\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\omega$) not. This is unquestionably a case where, by God’s allowance, the will of the Divine was set aside in deference to the will of man. Thus, the will of God was here conditioned upon the will of humanity – and obviously the *free* will of man. And since this has soteric connotations, the passage clearly indicates God’s will of salvation is resistible.

This study will consider one final verse in this category, this one addressing particularism. Peter writes, “The Lord is . . . not willing (βούλομαι) for any to perish but [willing] for all to come to repentance” (2Pet 3:9). One wonders why Calvinists, who constantly argue that whatever God wills will be accomplished, functionally argue against that very principle here and say that God does not provide a way for that which He wills. It is no small feat of interpretational gymnastics to twist this passage to undermine what it clearly does state: God does not will (desire) for people to eternally perish; He wills (desires) for them to repent. And yet He – the One who alone is able to provide a way for that will to be accomplished – cares so little about both His own will and the individuals perishing that He determines to not provide a way for repentance? That would be the height of inconsistency, a total disregard by God of His own will (from He Who the Calvinists constantly laud as the One that places His will above all else), and a total lack of love from Him who scriptures say “is love.” It is just inconceivable. This study can only conclude that this is another case of the a priori ideology influencing one’s interpretation,⁴⁴ and in this case forcing a meaning that is contrary to what is actually meant.

But the electionists might counter that the proclaimed inconsistency is not different than the inconsistency that free-willers’ approach demands: That God wills the salvation of those that are never saved, and thus His will is still thwarted. This would be a valid observation, and worthy of a moment of thought. If will in this passage were understood as God’s determined plan, then in fact both sides of the argument are faced with irreconcilable contradictions. Free-willers are faced with the contradiction between what God determines will happen and what in reality doesn’t happen. But electionists find God determined to save *everyone*, and that is itself contrary to their understanding of election.

⁴⁴ For an extended discussion of the impact of a priori ideologies in the election – free will debate, see Burke, *Debate*, 9ff.

It seems necessary to understand will in this passage not as a determined plan, but as the far more common nuance of “desire.” Yet while such a connotation actually frees both parties from the noted contradictions, it is still problematic for the Calvinists. Such a connotation would state that God desires one thing when in fact His actions (as per Calvinistic dogma) show otherwise. Does God genuinely desire every person to be saved, and yet provides for the reprobate no chance to receive that which is readily available and even provides salvation of others? This would require that the actions of God are clearly in contradiction to His stated desire. And given the principle of Prov 20:11 (“Even a child makes himself known by his acts...” (ESV)), one is left to conclude that God’s action in disallowing salvation to anyone negates the statement that He desires their salvation. This in turn makes God to be a liar. This student rather chooses to take the alternate route that does not functionally result in such accusations against God.

This study rather takes the passage for what it says, and how it arguably would have been understood in the hearing of those originally receiving this epistle: God does not wish (and therefore does not will) anyone to perdition; God desires that all repent; and by clear implication, God provides a way of repentance for all. Particularism (and reprobation as well) are thus refuted.

Summary

This study of the intrinsic and contextual meanings of the Biblical terms for “will” leads to the following conclusions:

1. Will is a very broad term, ranging in meaning from desire to determined plan. Any specific connotations and limitations must be set by the context of a passage.

2. Man has a will that is his own, exercised at his own free discretion (as opposed to fatalism). In the words of Jerome, “For that we have free will, and according to our own choice incline to good or evil, is part of His grace who made us what we are, in His own image and likeness.”⁴⁵
3. Will is used with both God and man as subject, and the term carries the same range of meanings in both groups. Within that broader range, will in the sense of exercising one’s own determined plan is applicable to God and man alike, although the former is clearly superior to the latter in the event that the two were matched against each other.
4. In allowing man the freedom to use his own will, God does at times subjugate His will to man’s.
5. Specifically in the case of salvation, there is clear evidence that:
 - a. God genuinely wills the salvation of all people (thus implying that He has made the way whereby all people might be saved);
 - b. The will of God in actually conveying salvation is [by His own sovereign choice] conditioned upon the will of man, at least to the extent that man can by his own will accept or refuse that which God (Christ) wills for him.

Implications from Other Bible Teachings

The above arguments are deemed enough to bring Calvinistic election into serious question, if not disallow it completely. The following shorter deliberations are offered to further address the theological considerations of the election – free will debate.

⁴⁵ Jerome, "Against the Pelagians, Book 1," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: A Select Library of the Christian Church. (Second Series)*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).

The General and Genuine Invitation

Constraints will not allow a fully developed discussion, but the following is a list of the scriptures which indicate that God's offer of salvation is to everyone, and thus address the question of Calvinist particularism.

- [God] desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1Tim 2:4, emphasis added)
- [John the Baptist] came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him (Jn 1:7, emphasis added)
- The Lord . . . is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance (2 Pet 3:9, emphasis added).
- But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, [even] to those who believe in His name (Jn 1:12, emphasis added).
- For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10).
- And it shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Acts 2:21, emphasis added).
- Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved (Rom 10:13, emphasis added).
- The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost (Rev 22:17, emphasis added).
- For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life (John 3:16, emphasis added).

Read with their natural meanings, as the original readers would have understood them, any one of these verses would draw particularism into question. The weight of the whole is sufficient to disprove this aspect of Calvinistic election.

The Demand for Missions

From the various words and efforts of Philip, Barnabas, Silas, Paul, and even Jesus Himself, the scriptures are replete with both commands and examples of missions labor. The

instructions of Jesus were not just for His own time but are equally applicable at all points in the church's history: Pray to the Lord of the harvest that He might send more laborers into the fields that are white unto harvest.

Yet in Calvinistic literature the principles of Calvinism – specifically its theories of unconditionality and the foreordination associated with particularism – make missions logically superfluous. Cute quips – e.g. Piper's, "Evangelism and missions are not imperiled by the biblical truth of [Calvinistic] election, but empowered by it, and the triumph is secured by it"⁴⁶ – only distract from the importance of this issue, but in no way lessen the severity of its challenge. This study found no Calvinist writer who adequately explained why there is a need for missions if Calvinistic election is a reality.

To spell it out, what happens to the elect "Juan" (a Bolivian native) if Missionary Smith had refused to go and share the gospel? From a Calvinist's perspective it cannot be denied that Juan is among the elect since he was saved under Smith's personal witness just moments before Juan's death. But was Smith's commitment to missions work, and even his witness to Juan on that very day irresistibly foreordained, or were they decisions of Smith's free will? The hundreds of missionaries who refused to follow their calling show by example that Smith obviously could have chosen to do the same, thus speaking against its irresistibility. So, one finds that (1) Juan is among the elect, and (2) Smith is a witness by his own choice (willingness) to follow God's calling.

Based upon these two facts, one is logically left to pick one of only two conclusions: (1) Juan is elect and would have been saved even if there had been no gospel witness, thus making missions superfluous; or (2) Salvation is dependent upon one sharing the gospel message – a

⁴⁶ John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God's Delight in Being God*, Rev. and expanded ed. (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2000), 153.

sharing which is done by man's free choice to follow God or not – making election conditioned upon the choice of man (in this case, the witness). If Calvinism insists on election that rises above any impact of man and his will (thus ruling out the latter conclusion), logic demands that the Calvinist either accept the former conclusion – that missions is superfluous – or live in logical inconsistency.

Were unconditional election clearly and unquestionably taught in the scriptures, this student would be willing to simply acknowledge his human inability to “reconcile friends,” as the famous London pulpiteer reportedly once said. But since, in his best observations, such Calvinistic dogmas are not unquestionably presented – and in fact are contrary to the natural reading of passages previously cited in this study – there is no compulsion to blindly accept what logically contradicts the clear Biblical mandate for missions.

The Nature of God

The scripture's description of God is One who is both loving of all mankind (Jn 3:16), and demanding of one's love of others (Matt 22:36-40) from His children. Even the sternness of the Mosaic Law was given in love in order that man might be ready to understand and accept Christ's sacrificial death – for without the sternness of the Law man cannot appreciate mercy or even see the need for it. The whole of scripture loudly proclaims what is worded by the apostle who labeled himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved: “God is love” (1Jn 4:8, 16).

Yet this God who is love and is motivated by love sits in stark contrast to the Calvinists' representation of a God whose ultimate motivation is not love, but rather His own will and His own glory. This student would argue that a God that is capable of legitimately offering salvation to a lost soul and yet wills to do otherwise – while He is well within His rights and technically does no unfairness to that soul – is nevertheless not truly the God of love proclaimed in scripture.

Does not the underlying principle of 1Jn 3:17 – “But whoever has the world's goods [i.e., provisions capable of helping the needy], and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?” – itself argue against the perspective of God demanded by the Calvinists? By the principles set forth in this passage, if God has the provisions to save (which all agree that He does) and yet chooses to withhold them from some, then God’s actions are thereby inconsistent with and contrary to God’s love. Since such a conclusion is inconceivable, it argues that the supposition upon which it is based is itself in error.

This study rather maintains that the clear teachings of scripture concerning the core loving nature of God rules out Calvinistic particularism. Even the Reformed Schaff concurs: “The Calvinistic system . . . [has the] fundamental defect of confining the saving grace of God and the atoning work of Christ to a small circle of the elect, and ignoring the general love of God to all mankind. . . . It is a theology of Divine sovereignty rather than of Divine love. . . .”⁴⁷

The Simple Instructions for Salvation

Another Biblical truth that undermines Calvinist election is the simple instructions of salvation, of which one instance will be cited. When the Philippian jailer asked what was required of him in order to be saved (Acts 16:30-31), Paul and Silas replied with the simple aorist active imperative, “Πίστευσον” (*pisteuson*, i.e., believe to the point of committing oneself, trust). As evidenced by his question alone, the jailer had already been drawn by God (Jn 6:44), yet he was not saved by that drawing alone – he still had to πίστευσον. The one thing that stood between the man and salvation was an active verb – i.e., salvation was to be actuated only when he acted in trust. A passive verb might give a legitimate margin for irresistibility, but

⁴⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 6th ed., 8 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), v8: 261.

the acquisition of salvation resting upon an active verb – something that the man must actively choose to do (accept) – arguably indicates that irresistibility has no reasonable place in salvation.

The very meaning of πίστευσον itself arguably implies a free-will decision. Can a man truly commit (trust, have faith in) if that commitment is not his own decision? Can an outside entity trust for me, or make me committed apart from my own choice to put that level of belief into something? This study maintains that leveraged belief is not genuine belief of the heart, and it is only such genuine faith of the heart that God recognizes.

Problematic Passages

The readings on the election – free will debate were very insightful. Seeing the specific arguments offered by Calvinists and interacting with them has caused this student to mature in his convictions and understanding of the subject. Yet while the vast majority of the evidence has helped solidify a belief against Calvinistic election, there are two passages that this student has yet to conclude with full assurance support his non-Calvinistic understanding of election. In the sense of fairness and commitment to the full teachings of the scriptures, these problem areas must be briefly noted.

Acts 13:48

“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” (emphasis added). The underlined phrase has long been problematic to this student’s non-Calvinistic view of election. However, the Calvinist Peterson suggests a plausible solution. Although discounting the interpretation, Peterson mentions that “appointed” can be legitimately interpreted as middle voice rather than passive. This, combined with giving “appointed” an alternative nuance of “devoted” (cf. 1Cor 16:15), would interpret the phrase “as many as devoted themselves to eternal life believed.”

This interpretation is a viable option that allows the passage to conform to what is arguably the broader intention of the Word. However, this is more of a stretch than this student can make without a degree of reservation. This is deemed a possible interpretation and the best I know to do with the passage for the present, but just because it can be made to work, does not mean that I am yet satisfied that it is the intention of the passage.

1 Peter 2:6-8

The second passage is 1Pet 2:6-8 – a passage that this student holds in reserve not because it seems to lean towards Calvinistic election, but rather because its meaning is simply not clear. And if its message is not clear, then this student cannot be sure it does not counter his current understanding. Verse 8 in particular says, “...A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this [doom] they were also appointed” (NASB). That these, who by choice were disobedient to the word, were (as disobedient) categorically appointed to doom is a viable and comfortable interpretation for me. However, some reservation is allowed for this passage because this student cannot at this point rule all other interpretations as inferior or otherwise unlikely.

Concluding Thoughts and Summary

Before summarizing this study’s findings, a note must be made concerning some impacting limitations. Although an extensive undertaking in its depth, this study has not been exhaustive in its breadth. In other words, the words and passages studied have had sufficient scrutiny for this student to feel their intended meanings have been ascertained and adequately stated. However, this study has not covered all scriptures, and it is quite possible – even likely – that other passages address the primary issues considered herein. While every effort has been made to not turn a blind eye to any dissenting passage, it is possible that such passages do exist

and due consideration of them might require a degree of change in this study's conclusions. In short, it would be unwise to presume that all that the Bible has to say about election and free will has been considered in this study.

This study must also note a limitation inherent in portions of its approach. At times this study attempted to show where scripture runs counter to or lacks support of aspects of Calvinistic theology. Even where this is shown to be true, it would be unwise to assume that any lack of support for Calvinism necessarily implies support for the opposite side. As Josh 5:13-14 bears out, God (and arguably His truths) are above taking sides, and any valid argument against one's opponent does not in itself show Biblical support for one's own arguments.

Although often treating all Calvinists as a single unit, this study recognizes that there is wide variation within that camp. Thus, while on occasion the whole may be addressed, it is understood that the particular point being made may not be equally applicable to all individuals within that group. Additionally, this study readily admits to a limited exposure to Calvinism. It is not impossible that this study has been unduly impacted by a misunderstood doctrine or the false assumption that the few Calvinistic writers speak for the thinking of the whole of Calvinism.

However, within its limitations this study has arguably shown that the natural meanings of the words and passages considered in this study – as intended by the original writers, and understood by the original recipients – clearly teach that Biblical election is not unconditional, is not irresistible, and is not particular. In other words, it is clear that the perspective of the words and passages studied point towards a soteric election that is accepted or rejected at the free will of man – a free will which is not to be understood in the Pelagian sense of the expression, but rather that one may freely accept or reject salvation which is offered to him.

This conclusion dovetails with that of its companion study which found “. . . that conditional election based upon God’s foreknowledge of man’s free act of accepting His offer of salvation is the historic perspective dating back to the earliest available writings on the subject,” and it was from this historic understanding that Pelagianism and Augustinianism, then later Roman dogma and Calvinism, veered.⁴⁸

By extension, this study also concludes that while it is common parlance to equate election with Calvinism, such use of the term is actually inaccurate. Election is a Biblical term, but as concluded here does not carry Calvinistic implication, so Calvinism and election are thus not synonymous. Additionally, to think of the debate as “Election versus Free Will” (as even this study has done) is technically inaccurate, for true (Biblical) election is not at odds with free will.

Late in this study the meaning and significance of “to call” came into question. This study attempted to briefly address this for present purposes, but it is felt that further study in this area would be insightful. Specifically, do the terms and occurrences of “calling” linguistically and/or contextually imply a beckoning (resistible or irresistible), a naming, a bestowing of rank or some other meaning(s), and what are the theological ramifications to the election – free will debate? As has been shown in the narrower scope of this study, such differences in meaning could speak directly to this debate.

Such are the primary doctrinal conclusions. Yet, although quite necessarily, the theological should not be the sole beneficiary of this study. To adapt from Paul letter to the Corinthians, “If I have all theological knowledge of election yet have not love, I’ve missed the boat.” The deeper awareness gleaned from this study should bring a deeper appreciation for (1)

⁴⁸ Burke, *Debate*, 24.

the gift of salvation that God lovingly offers and draws each one of us to, and (2) the privilege that He bestows upon us in allowing us the freedom to accept or reject His gift. This appreciation should spark a greater love for Him who gives such wonderful gifts to us who deserve nothing.

This knowledge should make us diligent and loving witnesses, knowing that since God would have all men come unto Him, we can rest assured that the offer applies to all. And if we love them, then we will offer them the greatest gift of all – which is theirs for the asking.

But where does this leave us in our relationship with Calvinistic believers? Many within my own denomination would functionally cry “irreconcilable differences,” and divorce them. Such is a pity. I should hope that this investigation, along with its companion study, would sway my Calvinistic brethren towards the conclusions found here, but I am realistic enough to know that is not likely to happen. Like any human relationship, there are differences that arise which offer no mutually agreeable position, and the election – free will debate is one of them. While I am obligated to preach and teach the whole Word of God as I best understand it, like Paul I will rejoice in the sharing of the good news of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ alone, even when it is done by those having a perspective with details that differ from my own (Phil 1:18). Irreconcilable difference? Probably so, for the most part – but not so great that we are unable to genuinely love one another while acknowledging those differences. In our striving to hold fast to sound doctrine (Tit 1:9) may we never grow callused to the greater command to love our brethren – even those on the opposite side of this great debate.

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Appendix

A Hierarchical Understanding of God's Will⁴⁹

Much confusion seems to come from the ambiguity of the meaning of "God's will." Many Calvinists seem to be predisposed to understand all references to God's will as irresistible foreordination ("God's inviolable sovereign will"⁵⁰). However, "will" is a multifaceted word, with various shades of meaning, including "wish", "desire", "command", "choice", "insistence", and "allow." This student contends that there are no less than four (and possibly more) levels or types of God's will.

1. God's desire – Sometimes called "God's perfect will," this is anything that God wants done. To label this will as “desire” in no way minimizes its righteousness, nor does it lessen the sinfulness of man’s rebelling against it. This level includes God's will that Adam and Eve not eat from the fruit of the tree in the midst of the Garden, the Ten Commandments, and many of the instructions that God gives in the Bible. God's will (desire) that all men come unto Him (1Tim 2:4) belongs in this level.

2. Man's Freedom of Choice – Few would disagree that God wills at least a degree of freedom of choice for people. At times this freedom which He wills is exercised in ways that are in fact contrary to His perfect will (#1 above). He has thus chosen to give such freedom a higher priority (although not a higher value) than His desires (#1), at least temporarily. Numerous examples in scripture (e.g., Adam's eating of the fruit) and in daily life show God's will to give mankind freedom of choice often subjugates His perfect will.

⁴⁹ This appendix is adapted from a non-assignment report: Don Burke, *Supplement to Reading Interactions for John Piper's the Pleasures of God* (St. Louis: Covenant Theological Seminary, 2007).

⁵⁰ Piper, 330.

3. God's Changeable Decrees – Scripture is replete with examples of the decrees or intentions made by God – things that God states will happen. However, a number of these have been changed or are changeable by the intercessions or other activities of people. God's intended destruction of the Israelites and of Sodom were relaxed (at least to a degree) by the supplications of Moses and Abraham (respectively). God's decree of death for sinners is altered by their confession and repentance. Similarly, God's discipline for believers is often discontinued once they have a change of heart.

It is in this level of God's will where He decrees, "Whosoever will" (Rev. 22:17). God makes the decree that anyone who wishes may come. This is not a decree that all *will* be saved – but a decree that salvation is *offered* to all. This allows for the possibility that the lost individual, as Pharaoh, may so harden his heart that God removes the freedom to choose – but such removal need not imply that choice was not a legitimate offer in the first place.

4. God's Unchangeable Decrees – Some things in scripture are promised by God regardless of what individuals may choose. This includes the first and second comings of Christ, God's statement that "my word will not return unto me void," the eternal consequences of either accepting or never accepting Christ as Savior, and the glory that God will ultimately get from all things. These do not prevent man's freedom of choice, they simply rise above and are not controlled by such choices.

"You shall reap what you sow" probably belongs in this category. This would explain why people often still must face the consequences of their sins even after they have repented (#2) and God has removed His punishment (#3).

Note that God's unchangeable decree upon a group is not necessarily imposed upon the individuals within that group. For example, God decreed that He will have a remnant of His

people Israel that would continue; however such a decree does not necessarily imply that a given Jew was a part of that remnant.

All of these various levels may aptly be called the "will of God." Thus, the use of this expression in scripture does not always carry the same connotations or even assurance of that will being accomplished.

In conclusion, this student submits the following which is deemed to be the Biblical perspective of God's will and man's will: At the very beginning of God's interaction with man, God willed (level #1 above) that Adam not eat of the fruit. However, He subjugated that will to His will that man be allowed the freedom to choose (#2) to obey Him or not. When man exercised that his freedom, he was not free from the consequences (#3, and eventually #4) of his choice. Similarly, God wills (#1) that all men be saved. However He also likewise subjugates that will to His will that individuals be free to choose (#2) to accept Him or not. Nevertheless, they are bound to live under the consequences (#3, and eventually #4) of such choices. This student contends that this pattern of an individual's freedom to accept or reject that which God has shown him – as opposed to irresistible unconditional foreordination of God upon that individual – is the pattern set forth from the earliest chapters of the scriptures and is the thread woven throughout the whole of the Book.