

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE GOD'S ELECT?

Titus 1:1

By Andy Manning

Titus 1:1 says, "Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness." Notice that Paul refers to Christians as "God's elect."

What does the word "elect" mean? The word "elect" in Greek is *eklektos*; it means chosen. So God's elect are God's chosen ones. This is exactly how the CSB often translates the word *eklektos* – chosen, or chosen ones. **Colossians 3:12** says, "Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and dearly loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience."

Who are God's chosen ones? God's chosen ones, or the elect, are those whom God has chosen to save. Go back to Colossians 3:12. Paul is writing to the church, the Christians in Colossae, and he refers to them as God's elect, or God's chosen ones. Peter refers to Christians as God's elect in several places. **1 Peter 1:1-2** says, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ: To those chosen, living as exiles dispersed abroad in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient and to be sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Christ." **1 Peter 2:9** says, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Now this is written to all Christians – all those who have been saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. God's elect are those whom God has chosen to save. The Bible is clear that God has chosen to save some, and to not save some.

When did God choose to save the elect? **Ephesians 1:4** says, "For he chose (Greek: *eklegomai*) us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in love before him." So God chose to save the elect before the foundation of the world. In verse 5 Paul uses a word that means He chose us beforehand. **Ephesians 1:5** says, "He predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ for himself, according to the good pleasure of his will." The word "predestined" in Greek is *proorizo*, and it means to predetermine, to determine beforehand, or to determine that something would happen in advance. We see a similar thought in **Ephesians 1:11-12**. "In him we have also received an inheritance, because we were predestined according to the plan of the one who works out everything in agreement with the purpose of his will, 12 so that we who had already put our hope in Christ might bring praise to his glory." So God chose to save the elect before the foundation of the world; before creation.

Now this is where it gets interesting. This is where it gets controversial. Why does God choose to save the elect, and not others? Does man have any say in his salvation? Is it all God? Does God do something, and we do something?

This is actually one of the biggest theological controversies in all of Christianity. It has divided families and marriages; it has been the cause of church splits; it has been the cause of denominational splits. It is the controversy between Calvinism and Arminianism, and it centers around the concept of election.

Today I want to show you the two different views of election; the view that I believe is correct; and why this matters.

2 Views of Election

1. Unconditional Election.

This first view of election was popularized in the 16th century by a French theologian named John Calvin during the Protestant Reformation. The doctrine of unconditional election is the idea that **God chose to save some, not based on anything in the individual, but based solely on His will.**

Unconditional election is one of the famous Five Points of Calvinism, which are also called the Doctrines of Grace. These five points are remembered with the acronym TULIP.

T stands for the doctrine of **total depravity**, which is the idea that people are so infected by sin that they cannot and will not choose to put their faith in Christ unless God enables them to do so.

Calvinists believe that regeneration comes before conversion. Regeneration is that part of salvation when God gives you a new heart with the desire and power to please Him. Does God give you a new heart before you accept Christ by faith, or after you accept Christ by faith? Well, I would say that first comes conversion, and then comes regeneration. First, you put your faith in Jesus Christ, and then God gives you a new heart. But a Calvinist would say that unless God first gives you a new heart, you would never choose to accept Christ b/c of total depravity.

U stands for the doctrine of **unconditional election**, which is the idea that God to save some before the foundation of the world, not based on anything in the individual, but based solely on His will. It not based on any condition that the person has met; it is based solely on God's

mysterious, sovereign will; and for that reason it is referred to as unconditional. Unconditional election is sometimes called predestination.

L stands for the doctrine of **limited atonement**. The atonement refers to Christ's sacrificial death on the cross for our sins. Limited atonement is the idea that Christ did not die for everyone, but only for the elect – only for those God chose to save before the foundation of the world. The argument is that if Christ died for everyone, then everyone would not be saved; but since we know that only the elect are saved, then Christ only died for the elect.

I stands for the doctrine of **irresistible grace**. It refers to the idea that when God calls the elect to salvation through the preaching of the gospel message, His grace is irresistible; the elect cannot help but repent and have in Jesus Christ. Remember that Calvinists believe that regeneration precedes conversion. Before an elect person even turns to Christ in repentance and faith, when they hear the gospel, the Holy Spirit gives them a new heart, and they can't help but turn to God. To the elect, God's grace is irresistible.

On the other hand, to the non-elect, or the reprobate, God's grace is ever-resistible. If God has not elected a person to salvation, then no matter many times you preach to them, no matter how well you preach, no matter what, they will not turn to Christ in repentance and faith.

P stands for the doctrine of the **perseverance of the saints**. Now I wholeheartedly agree with this. It is the idea that once a person gets saved, once they are born again, regenerated, justified, redeemed, baptized with the Holy Spirit, then it is impossible for them to sometime later turn away from Christ and lose their salvation. Most Baptists accept total depravity and the perseverance of the saints, but reject the three in the middle. That's because we believe the first and last are clearly taught in Scripture, but the three in the middle are not.

Those are the doctrines of grace. They are the five points of Calvinism. They are held by many Baptists, most Presbyterians, and most Christians who refer to themselves as "reformed." And unconditional election is what theologian Roger Olson calls "the heart of their (Calvinist) system of soteriology."

2. **Conditional election.**

The second view of election, conditional election, was popularized by a Dutch theologian from the sixteenth century named Jacob Arminius. The doctrine of conditional election is the idea that **God elected some to salvation before the creation of the world based on His foreknowledge of who would accept the gospel of Jesus Christ**. In other words, the reason

that God chose to save the elect, and did not choose to save the non-elect, is that He looked into the future to see who would put their faith in Jesus, and He chose them for salvation. Arminians believe in election and predestination, but they believe that God elects or predestinates based on His foreknowledge.

Now I'm not a full Arminian or a full Calvinist. I'm a two point Calvinist (total depravity, and perseverance of the saints), and I'm not a full Arminian, because Arminians believe that you can lose your salvation. Usually Pentecostals, Charismatics, and Methodists are full Arminians. Baptists have a mix of Calvinism and Arminianism.

As for total depravity, I agree. Mankind is so infected by sin through the Fall, that he would not and could not turn to Christ for salvation without God enabling him to do so. Ephesians 2:1 says that before salvation "you were dead in your trespasses and sins."

As for unconditional election, I disagree, and I will show you why in just a minute. I believe that God's election and predestination are based on His foreknowledge of who will believe. This is called conditional election.

As for limited atonement. I wholeheartedly disagree. I believe in unlimited atonement. Christ died for everyone, making it possible for everyone to be saved, but only those who believe in Christ are saved. **1 John 2:2** says, "He himself is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for those of the whole world."

As for irresistible grace, I disagree. I believe in prevenient grace. The word prevenient means grace that goes before salvation. I believe that through the preaching and hearing of the Gospel the Holy Spirit enables a person to accept Christ, but because that person has free will he can also choose to reject Christ.

And as for perseverance of the saints, I wholeheartedly agree. We are not saved by good works, and therefore we will not lose our salvation when we fail to do good. As well, once a person chooses to accept Christ, he is born again, with the desire and power to please God, and Holy Spirit indwells Him, these graces prevent a person from turning away from God. Jesus said in **John 6:39**, "This is the will of him who sent me: that I should lose none of those he has given me but should raise them up on the last day." **John 10:27-28** says, "27 My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."

Now let's go back to the doctrine of election, which is really the heart of the debate between Calvinism and Arminianism. As I said repeatedly, I believe in conditional election. That is, I believe that God chooses to save some and not save others, and this choice is predetermined before creation, but that His choice is based on His foreknowledge of who will believe in Christ. Let me give you the reasons that I believe in conditional election.

Reasons for Conditional Election

1. Christ died for all.

We already looked at **1 John 2:2**. "He himself is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for those of the whole world." **1 Timothy 2:5-6** says, "5 For there is one God and one mediator between God and humanity, the man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave himself as a ransom for all, a testimony at the proper time." **1 Timothy 4:10** says, "For this reason we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe." Calvinists would say that Christ did not die for all, but only all of the elect; the whole world of the elect. But this is not good interpretation. The Biblical text clearly means all – every human being – not all of a select group. Why would Christ die for all, if not to make salvation possible and available to everyone? Why would Christ die for all if He had no intention to make salvation available to all men?

2. God is just.

The Bible teaches that God is morally just and fair and perfect. He would never do anything unfair. **Deuteronomy 32:4** says, "The Rock—his work is perfect; all his ways are just. A faithful God, without bias, he is righteous and true." Now, God would not be unfair if He sent everyone to hell, because that's what we deserve. But how would it be just for God to choose to save some, and not others, and it is not based on any difference between the two classes – such as some believe in Christ, while others reject Christ? How is that fair?

In other words, the doctrine of unconditional election, in my view, makes God out to be a moral monster who elects some to eternal life, and He elects others to go to hell, and it's not based on anything different about those two groups. They are equal in terms of what they deserve.

Only if Jesus died for all, and only if God offers salvation to all, is He just.

3. God wants all to be saved.

A third reason for conditional election is that the Bible is clear that God wants all to be saved. **1 Timothy 2:3-4** says, “3 This is good, and it pleases God our Savior, 4 who wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” **2 Peter 3:9** says, “The Lord does not delay his promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance.”

If God wants all to be saved, then why would He only choose to save some, and not others? Calvinists handle this in two ways. First, they claim that God wants to save all, because He loves everyone, but He only chooses to save some. Why? We don't know, but it has nothing to do with the people that He chooses to save. Second, they claim that when it says that God wants everyone to be saved, it is referring to everyone of the elect; when it says that God wants all to come to repentance, it is referring to all of the elect. But neither of these explanations are very sound.

The best explanation is that God wants to save everyone, but He only chooses to save those who respond in faith to Jesus Christ.

In other words, if God wants everyone to be saved, and election is based simply upon God's sovereign will and nothing in the individual, then why wouldn't God choose to save everyone? Since God doesn't elect everyone to salvation, but He wants everyone to be saved, it must mean that His election is based on how people respond to the gospel.

4. The invitation to salvation is universal.

There are several verses in which the invitation to salvation is made to everyone; it is universal. Let's look at some. **John 3:16** is the most famous. “For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” This invitation is for everyone; not just a select group; everyone; anyone; whosoever believes in Him. **Romans 10:13** says, “For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Again, the invitation to salvation is for everyone. **Acts 17:30** says, “Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent.”

Here's the question. Why would God invite everyone to repent and believe and be saved if He is not going to make it possible for everyone to repent and believe and be saved? Calvinists would say that it is not possible for everyone to repent and believe; only the elect can repent and believe. But a more Biblical position would be that God invites everyone to repent and

believe, and enables everyone repent and believe, but people have free will and are able to resist His grace. And so God only elects to save those whom He foreknew would believe.

5. Scripture seems to indicate that election is based on God's foreknowledge of who would respond positively to the gospel.

Finally, there are a couple of verses that seem to be very clear that God that God's election is based on His foreknowledge of who will believe in Jesus. There are two passages in particular that we need to look at.

First, **Romans 8:28-30**. "28 We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. 30 And those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified."

Notice that it says in verse 29 that God predestined those He foreknew. Now, it does not specify what God foreknew, but many scholars believe that the implication is that God foreknew that the elect would respond to the gospel, and therefore He predestined them salvation. Let's look at one more verse.

1 Peter 1:1-2 says, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ: To those chosen (elected), living as exiles dispersed abroad in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, chosen (elected) 2 according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient and to be sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Christ."

So in Romans 8 it says that predestination is based on God's foreknowledge, and here in 1 Peter it says very clearly that the elect are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God. Now, once again, it does not specify what God foreknew, but it does say that election is based on God's foreknowledge. The implication, I believe, is that election is based upon God's foreknowledge of how people will respond to the gospel.

So what is a Biblical definition of election? **God elected some to salvation before the creation of the world based on His foreknowledge of who would accept the gospel of Jesus Christ.**

Why is Conditional Election Important?

Now let's talk briefly about why this is important. The primary problem with unconditional election is that it hurts the reputation of God. The Bible presents God as love, and fair, and compassionate, and just, and righteous. But once again, how is it fair if two people deserve hell, but God chooses to reward one with eternal life, and it is not based on any difference between the two individuals? Unless God's election is based on some condition met by one and not the other, such as faith in the gospel, then God is unfair. It's hard to love a God like that. It's hard to share a God like that. It's hard to believe in a God like that.

Now let me close with this. Remember that when you are thinking about theology it is important to distinguish between essential doctrines, and non-essential doctrines. Why? Because there are some things worth dividing over, and there are some things that are not worth dividing over. If we don't divide over anything, then a Christianity can believe anything; and if a Christian can believe anything, then it doesn't mean anything to be a Christian. As well, if we divide over every disagreement, then we won't be able to work together and accomplish anything for the glory of God. God has called us to unite in local churches for the advancement of the gospel, but if we divide over every disagreement, then we won't be able to get anything done.

Theologian Albert Mohler offers a helpful suggestion. He suggests that doctrines ought to be organized into first, second, and third order doctrines. First order doctrines are those that are essential to believe in order to be called a Christian (the deity of Christ; the Trinity; the inspiration of Scripture). Second order doctrines are those that we must agree on in order to work together in the church (baptism and the Lord's Supper; speaking in tongues; eternal security; the inerrancy of Scripture). Third order doctrines are those that are important, but we do not have to agree on to be a Christian, or to serve God in the same church. This is where the doctrine of election falls. While it is important, it is not important enough to let our disagreement lead to division. Within the Southern Baptist Convention, for example, there are many pastors and theologians who are five-point Calvinists, and there are many who, like me, are not. But we don't allow that disagreement to divide us. Instead we agree that salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone, and that the church must diligently work to reach the lost, both locally and globally with the gospel.