

Savability: Southern Baptists' Core Soteriological Conviction and Contribution



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The Southern Baptist Convention was formed in 1845 and is comprised of forty-five thousand churches, sixteen million members, ten thousand home and international missionaries, and six large seminaries with ten thousand students preparing for ministry.¹ Last year, over six hundred thousand people were baptized in Southern Baptists churches and ministries in the United States and around the world. The SBC has survived and thrived in a kaleidoscopic and increasingly secular American culture. While mainline denominations are collapsing under the weight of modernism's flight from biblical authority,² Southern Baptists' unique identity, polity, and theology have seen us through difficult days in unparalleled fashion.³ All of these reasons and more provide a sufficient warrant for the articulation of a theological perspective that is uniquely our own. Not a Baptist theology, for we do not speak for all Baptists, but a *Southern Baptist* theology. This needs to be done not for the purposes of separating ourselves from others or demonstrating our superiority. Rather, it is right for us to codify and contribute to the wider

¹By comparison, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) has 351,406 members in 1,771 churches, with 10,067 professions of faith (available at <http://www.pcaac.org/statistics.htm>; accessed October 13, 2012), yet it has a very distinctive theological tradition and exerts an influence on American evangelical theology that far exceeds its size. Note the output and impact of R. C. Sproul, James M. Boice, D. James Kennedy, J. Ligon Duncan, Timothy J. Keller, Phillip G. Ryken, Bryan Chapell, Edmund P. Clowney, John M. Frame, and Tullian Tchividjian, to name a few.

²Alister McGrath, *The Future of Christianity, Blackwell Manifestos* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 100. McGrath essentially makes the point that the future of Christianity will not include the mainline denominations.

³*Contra* David S. Dockery, *Southern Baptist Consensus and Renewal: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Proposal* (B&H Academic, 2008), 9, who believes that Southern Baptist laypeople were ill-equipped for modernism's challenge to biblical authority, I think it is clear that they were quite adequately equipped. Through the consistent and biblical simplicity of Hershel Hobbs' Sunday School literature and the leadership of preachers like W.A. Criswell, Adrian Rogers, Jerry Vines, Charles Stanley, and Jimmy Draper, Southern Baptists believed that biblical inerrancy, soul-winning, and missions were core values. When they discovered that these values were not shared at their agencies, local church autonomy empowered them to bring radical change.

Christian world what we understand to be the basis for the sustained cooperative kingdom reach that is unique to us. Moreover, because the SBC is being challenged by the threats of fragmentation and decline, it is needful to understand clearly what it is about our identity that should be maintained as we seek to make our message meaningful in an ever-changing world.⁴ Finally, because no theological paradigm is perfect or eternal, ours needs to be publicly articulated so that it may be evaluated, improved, and retooled for future generations.

Within the broad sweep of systematic theology, soteriology has been the most contested doctrine over the last fifteen hundred years. While Calvinism and Arminianism have dominated the discussion within Protestantism, neither system has prevailed in Southern Baptist life.⁵ The contention here is that our reluctance to identify with either system is actually a clue to our effectiveness: we believe very simply but very deeply that *anyone can be saved and, once saved, is secure forever*. Anyone is “sovereignly savable.” In a technical theological sense, savability seeks to convey the idea that the salvation of every sinner is the object of God’s sovereign love and Christ’s saving work. Savability means that anyone who hears the gospel is the object of the Spirit’s saving ministrations and can respond with repentance and faith or rebellion and unbelief. This response of faith results in the sealing of the Spirit and eternal security in the accomplished work of Christ. Savability also insists that every sinner is in desperate need of salvation; it takes as axiomatic each sinner’s absolute need for rescue and redemption. Savability speaks not of one’s ability to save himself (the term itself is fundamentally passive) but of God’s ability to save anyone, even the “vilest offender who truly believes.” In a sense, the ten articles of “A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation” are simply an expression of the various implications the belief that anyone can be saved forever.

Now, all Southern Baptist Calvinists want to speak of the gospel, salvation, and God’s love as being for all, but their own theology works against the intelligibility of such a claim. If Christ died only for the sins of some, then no provision has been made for others, making their salvation *impossible*. If some are chosen without respect to their response of faith, then *no hope* of salvation ever existed for others. If saving grace is irresistible for some, then saving grace is *unavailable* for others. If there is no hope for some, if salvation is impossible and saving grace is unavailable for some, then the Calvinists’ claim that the gospel is for all is, ultimately, self-contradictory.⁶

⁴Before Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), which is strongly Calvinistic, became the dominant theology textbook at Southern Baptist seminaries, Millard Erickson’s *Christian Theology*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) was the standard. While encyclopedic and conservative, its moderate Calvinism is not particularly distinctive, creative, or compelling. Certainly, it never produced the sort of convictional commitment to a particular theological system that Grudem’s has. It is more of a reference book for general theological parameters rather than a resource book for constructive Southern Baptist theological engagement.

⁵Malcolm Yarnell, “Neither Calvinists nor Arminians but Baptists,” White Paper 36, The Center for Theological Research (September 2010); available at <http://www.baptisttheology.org/baptisttheology/assets/File/NeitherCalvinistsNorArminiansButBaptists.pdf> (accessed October 6, 2012). See also Dockery, 60–62.

⁶Tom Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory*, rev. ed. (Cape Coral, FL: Founder’s Press, 2006), 281: “All

Because of our unique commitment to biblical authority, to simplicity and praxis, and to passion for missions, Southern Baptists must make clear what we mean when we say that the gospel is for all. For the vast majority of us, we mean that *anyone can be saved*, and we are intentionally not speaking the language of consistent Calvinism when we say it. A theological tradition running from Carroll and Scarborough through Mullins, Conner, Hobbs, Criswell, Rogers, and Patterson is a distinct and sufficient basis on which to construct such a soteriology. The Traditional Statement (TS) is a first attempt at a programmatic description of Southern Baptist soteriology, and it is made in hope that a Southern Baptist systematic theology might someday be forged that is reflective of the totality of Southern Baptist witness both historically and at present.

To be sure, this soteriological tradition has its weaknesses. The simplicity and practicality of the conviction that anyone can be saved makes it easy to truncate and manipulate. Constructive theology should be critical theology, and Southern Baptists must be willing to let our tradition be challenged by the Word and by the wider *communio sanctorum*. This is why the Calvinist critique of Southern Baptist soteriology has often been significant and salient. It has exposed the need for coherence, depth, spiritual formation, true community, and substantive cultural engagement in our theology. Indeed, Southern Baptist theology has always had a deep, intimate connection with Calvinism that has kept it grounded in the superiority of Scripture, the sovereignty of God, the sufficiency of Christ, and the severity of sin. It has provided a critical counterweight to the revivalism that mediates to us our belief in savability but sometimes falls into man-centered excess. While this critical evaluation is beneficial, Calvinism has never been the dominant voice. Despite the claims of a Southern Baptist theological Golden Age of Calvinism to which we must return,⁷ there is simply no denying that most Southern Baptists do not think of themselves as Calvinists and that the prospect of such an identity is disconcerting.⁸ The proponents of the TS believe that, while Calvinism is a major contributor to Southern Baptist self-understanding, its logical implications are ultimately at cross-purposes with our core soteriological conviction that anyone can be saved.

are invited indiscriminately to share in Christ, Christ is open to all and displayed to all. It is clear, however, that only those who believe receive the promised benefits. How does anyone believe? By special operation of God's power on the word of truth, a benefit given only to the elect."

⁷Fred A. Malone, "Misery Loves Company: A Presbyterian Pastor Comes Home," in *Why I Am a Baptist*, ed. Tom J. Nettles and Russell D. Moore (Nashville: B&H, 2001), 138. Cf. John Leland, "A Letter of Valediction on Leaving Virginia" in *The Letters of the Late Elder John Leland* (New York: G.W. Wood, 1845), 172, quoted in Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2d ed. (New Haven: Yale, 1992), 322. Leland believed that the best preaching is characterized by "the doctrine of sovereign grace . . . mixed with a little of what is called Arminianism."

⁸Russ Rankin, "SBC Pastors Polled on Calvinism and Its Effect," available at <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/research-sbc-pastors-polled-on-calvinism-affect-on-convention> (accessed on October 6, 2012). Sixty percent of pastors are concerned about Calvinism's influence in the SBC.

The TS was written to make clear the places where Southern Baptist thinking departs from Calvinism while acknowledging that, indeed, “non-Calvinism” is a poor descriptor of what we believe. Therefore, we are arguing for the term “Traditionalist” to define Southern Baptists who reject Calvinist soteriology. “Traditionalist” intends to convey that Southern Baptist soteriology from the very beginning has stood in appreciative but critical relationship with Calvinism. This tradition of modification of certain tenets of Calvinism is seen in all of our founding denominational documents including the Abstract of Principles, which does not include limited atonement or irresistible grace.⁹

The TS is written not only to challenge some of the specific components of Calvinism but also ultimately to challenge it at the deepest level. What holds Calvinism together, what provides its grid and filter for the biblical text, is its commitment to compatibilism, which is the idea that all events are unchangeably foreordained in such a way that people do not have the power to choose otherwise. This “soft-determinism” colors every aspect of the system. Theistic determinism necessarily undoes any regular understanding of humanity’s interaction with the world and with God. On this view, claims that God loves everyone and wants to save everyone are simply untenable.¹⁰ While Calvinists sincerely reject such evaluations, the necessary implication is, unfortunately, unavoidable: God unconditionally causes certain people to spend eternity in hell.¹¹ Therefore, what is fundamental to Calvinism is quite problematic for Southern Baptist soteriology: we believe in savability; we believe that anyone can be saved.

To say that we are rejecting consistent Calvinism is, however, not an innovation, it is a theological tradition. The TS simply makes explicit what has always been the case for Southern

⁹Gregory A. Wills, *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1859-2009* (New York: Oxford University, 2009), 92–93: “[In the time of James P. Boyce] Few Southern Baptists were Arminians—perhaps none of the clergy—but many held “lax views” on the doctrine of election, most commonly by teaching that God elected persons because he foresaw that they would repent and believe.” William Broadus, an advocate for Southern Seminary at that time in Virginia, opposed Arminianism, “but he also knew that some Virginia Baptists might find an unqualified statement of the faculty’s Calvinism troubling” (93).

¹⁰William Lane Craig, *Only Wise God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000); Paul Himes, “When a Christian Sins: 1 Corinthians 10:13 and the Power of Contrary Choice in Relation to the Compatibilist-Libertarian Debate,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 54 (June 2011): 329–44; Kenneth Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010); James W. Lamb, “On a Proof of Incompatibilism,” *Philosophical Review* 86 (January 1977): 20–35; Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 48–53. Peter van Inwagen, “The Incompatibility of Free Will and Determinism,” *Philosophical Studies* 27 (1975): 185–99; Jerry Walls, “Why No Classical Theist, Let Alone Orthodox Christian, Should Ever Be A Compatibilist,” *Philosophia Christi* 13 (2011): 75–104; Mark Thomas Walker, “The Freedom of Judgment,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 11 (2003): 63–92.

¹¹Bruce Little, “Evil and God’s Sovereignty,” in *Whosoever Will*, ed. Steve Lemke and David Allen (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 297: “At the end of the day, if [Calvinists] wish to hold to their view of sovereignty [theistic determinism], they should be willing to accept the logical conclusion of their position and acknowledge that God is morally responsible for evil.”

Baptists. Our evangelism and missions have been driven by the conviction that it is God's sovereign desire for all people to hear and respond to the gospel. Many will never hear the gospel; many will hear and reject it. This is not due to any deficiency in God's plan or the power of the gospel. God, who is certainly powerful enough to create any possible world He wants, wanted a world of uncoerced relationships, and so the free response of people really matters. Yet, because of His great grace, anyone who hears the gospel may come and, believing, may have everlasting life. To abandon this for anything else is to trade in that which has made Southern Baptists so useful to God's kingdom for so long.¹²

¹²As a principle contributor to the report from the Calvinism Advisory Committee presented to the Houston Convention this year called "Truth, Trust, and Testimony in a Time of Tension," available at <http://www.sbclife.org/Articles/2013/06/sla5.asp> (accessed on November 26, 2013), I want to make clear that this essay and all the others here dealing with the TS are intended to work within the spirit of critically constructive interaction that is called for in the document. Unity does not demand unanimity, and we look forward to the ongoing conversation concerning Calvinism that will make us better together.

Commentary on Article 6: The Election to Salvation



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Introduction

Article 6 rests on the reality that election is clearly taught in the Scriptures and is an essential component of the doctrine of salvation. Election emphasizes the fact that salvation is accomplished through the Father's initiative, guaranteed by the person and work of Christ alone, and actualized in the lives of sinners through the power of the Holy Spirit. Election, therefore, communicates that salvation is completely gracious. It signifies the lavish generosity of God, who will save not just a few but an innumerable multitude. Election's announcement of God's sovereignty in salvation includes the role of the sinner's repentance and faith. God has chosen to bring into existence a people who belong to Him by faith in a world where their decisions

Article Six: Election to Salvation

We affirm that, in reference to salvation, election speaks of God's eternal, gracious, and certain plan in Christ to have a people who are His by repentance and faith.

We deny that election means that, from eternity, God predestined certain people for salvation and others for condemnation.

Genesis 1:26–28; 12:1–3; Exodus 19:6; Jeremiah 31:31–33; Matthew 24:31; 25:34; John 6:70; 15:16; Romans 8:29–30, 33; 9:6–8; 11:7; 1 Corinthians 1:1–2; Ephesians 1:4–6; 2:11–22; 3:1–11; 4:4–13; 1 Timothy 2:3–4; 1 Peter 1:1–2; 1 Peter 2:9; 2 Peter 3:9; Revelation 7:9–10

for or against Christ really matter. Rather than determining these choices Himself, God has gloriously and sovereignly decided to accord to each sinner the responsibility of surrendering to the Holy Spirit's leading in the preaching of the gospel. Since gospel proclamation is the means by which God brings His elective purposes to bear, election cannot be understood apart from the plan of God to bring salvation to the world *through* His chosen people and their sharing of the gospel with the lost.

God desires the salvation of everyone (John 3:16; 1 Tim 2:3–4; 2 Peter 3:9). No one is excluded from His saving intentions. Article Six, therefore, denies that election language in the Bible refers to God's eternal and fixed choice of some individuals for salvation and not others without respect to their response to the gospel. If God desires the salvation of *all people*, it cannot be the case that He has actually determined

to save only *some individuals*, while planning from eternity to consign the rest to everlasting punishment. When believers say, “God chose me,” they cannot also mean, “and, from eternity, He did not choose others.” To make such a statement is to dismiss the clear teaching of Scripture that God wants everyone to be saved. Therefore, when one says, “God chose me,” he means, “God has done everything necessary to bring me to salvation in a world where people’s decisions are a critical part of God’s ultimate purposes.” It is our belief, therefore, that the majority of Southern Baptists reject the idea that God predestines some people to hell.¹

If God has decided in eternity past which individuals He will not save, then those individuals cannot be thought of either as being truly loved by God or as being the objects of His saving intentions. Calvinists protest that it is simply a mystery as to how God loves people He wills to condemn before they are ever born. Some assert that God has two wills, one “hidden” and one “revealed,”² or two kinds of love,³ but most Southern Baptists view these answers as having neither a biblical nor logical basis. Moreover, Calvinists’ affirmation of “single predestination” over against “double predestination” as a method for absolving God of the charge of actively causing the lost to spend eternity in hell is unconvincing. To say that God merely passes over the lost rather than actively causing their perdition is both a distinction without a difference⁴ and a flat refusal to own the implications of the Calvinist system.⁵

Article Six and the *Baptist Faith and Message* (BFM)

Article 6 is completely in keeping with the treatment of the doctrine of election in the BFM, which has expressed Southern Baptist consensus on the matter for nearly a century and is based on a consensus that had emerged among Baptists in America nearly a century before that. Article 5 of the BFM states:

¹Calvinists likely will object to the phrase “predestined to hell” as a mischaracterization of their position, insisting that God does not “predestine” some sinners to hell; rather, He “foreordains” it, or “permits” it by withholding the grace necessary for them to be saved. Such double-speak should be rejected as mere semantics in the service of hiding a truth of Calvinism most Southern Baptists find unbiblical and objectionable: there is no one in hell who ever had the opportunity to be anywhere else.

²John Piper, “Are There Two Wills in God? Divine Election and God’s Desire for All to Be Saved,” in *The Grace of God and the Bondage of the Will*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 107–24.

³John MacArthur, “Does God Love the Elect and Hate the Non-Elect,” *Grace to You*; available at <http://www.gty.org/resources/questions/QA184> (accessed October 3, 2012).

⁴If I have the ability and opportunity to rescue someone who is drowning, then I have an obligation to render aid. If I simply stand aside and let them die, then I am morally culpable. Calvinist objections that the sinner is already dead will not suffice. If I have the ability and opportunity to resurrect a person but do not, my culpability is the same.

⁵Kenneth Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 148–49.

Election is the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners. It is consistent with the free agency of man, and comprehends all the means in connection with the end. It is the glorious display of God's sovereign goodness, and is infinitely wise, holy, and unchangeable. It excludes boasting and promotes humility.

This definition of election stands in clear contrast to more Calvinistic Baptist confessions.⁶ First, there is no mention of individuals who are not elect. The BFM does not affirm God's eternal and absolute rejection of certain individuals. Election is not God's plan to damn sinners; it is His plan to save sinners. Second, election is not configured in association with a deterministic view of divine action. The BFM makes no statement regarding God's decrees or His meticulous foreordination of all things including the supposedly "free" decisions of men. Instead, Article 2 emphasizes God's absolute foreknowledge of the free decisions of His creatures.

Older Calvinistic Baptist confessions deal with election before treating the doctrines of Christ, Man, and Salvation, making God's choice of some individuals but not others the lens through which these other doctrines should be understood. The BFM places election after these doctrines. In doing so, election *serves* God's glorious desire to save all rather than *constraining* it. The framers and revisers of the BFM had these much more Calvinistic Baptist confessions available to them, confessions which are much more consistent with the Westminster Confession's vision of election. Southern Baptists, however, have always been more comfortable with an understanding of election that was simpler, less speculative, and fully compatible with God's desire for the salvation of all people.

Election and Southern Baptist "Non-Calvinism"

Most Southern Baptists categorically deny that certain individuals are selected for hell before creation. They know what election *does not* mean. What is needed in Southern Baptist life is a clear statement of what election *does* mean. Southern Baptists affirm that election is taught in the Bible, that God is sovereign in salvation, and that He has a very specific plan for each life but a plan that includes their free choices. A strategy that many Southern Baptists adopt to deal with election is to employ what they think is "compatibilism," their idea that God's sovereign choice of some individuals is compatible with man's free response to the gospel. Strictly speaking, however, "compatibilism" is a technical philosophical term asserting that *determinism* and free will are compatible.⁷ Compatibilism is actually the Calvinistic view of divine action which sees every event as foreordained by God such that no human has the freedom of choice. Instead, "freedom" is the ability to do what one desires most. However, since people are not able to choose what they desire, those desires must be determined by God. This view of the relationship between divine

⁶See, i.e., *The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith* (1689), *The Philadelphia Confession of Faith* (1742), *The Baptist Catechism* (Charleston Association, 1813), and the *Abstract of Principles* (1858).

⁷*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "compatibilism," available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/compatibilism/> (accessed October 3, 2012).

action and human willing is simply unacceptable to most Southern Baptists who believe that the clear sense of Scripture is that people have real choices for which they are morally responsible.⁸

A Positive Construction of Election

A truly Southern Baptist understanding of election, one that is faithful to God's desire to save all and to the necessity of a real response to the gospel must incorporate the totality of the biblical witness concerning this doctrine. Election language in Scripture emphasizes the nature of God's ultimate plan to bring about the salvation of myriads of people without negating the real response of individual sinners to His offer of covenant relationship. It must be constantly kept in mind that the Bible does not unfold as systematic theology, but salvation-history. The Scriptures reveal what God is doing in history, especially the history of Israel, and make clear what God's actions demonstrate about His character and purposes. The question of God's ultimate plan for history through Israel is a controlling exegetical and theological question of both the Old and New Testaments. God's choice of Israel, therefore, is fundamental to the meaning of election in the Bible. Several crucial features emerge from the Scriptures' treatment of Israel's election. First, the distinction between Israel and everyone else is comprehensively and maximally *salvific*. God does not choose Israel and damn the nations.⁹ He chooses Israel to be a light of salvation to the nations. Second, this world-wide scope of election is based upon God's covenantal promises to bring His creation to completion in relationship with humankind. Third, election promises are typically mediated to and through one man, from whom these promises go out to all the earth (i.e. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, the Messiah). Fourth, these covenant promises, which are made to the whole covenant community and, through them, to the whole world, consequently must be ratified by faith in order to be realized by individuals. Fifth, these election promises are antecedent to any individual response, and they will be fulfilled because God alone has categorically committed Himself to bringing about their fulfillment.¹⁰

These five main trajectories of the election of Israel in the Old Testament govern the meaning of election language as it flows out into various applications in the New Testament. These trajectories cover the *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why* of election.

Covenantal

First, election is *covenantal*. This addresses the *why*, the purpose, of election. God has promised to redeem, and election speaks of God's intention and plan to keep that promise.

⁸John S. Hammett, "Human Nature" in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 381–92.

⁹Charlie Trimm, "Did YHWH Condemn the Nations When He Elected Israel? YHWH's Disposition Toward the Non-Israelites in the Torah," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 55/3 (2012): 536.

¹⁰See Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty*, 58–62, for a helpful discussion of the concepts of "antecedent" and "consequent" with respect to sovereignty and freedom is God's desire to save.

Election functions within God's sovereign commitment to bring about His ultimate purposes for all things, and it is hardwired to His desire for everyone to come to repentance and faith. This desire for maximum salvation is expressed fully in God's covenant purposes for creation from the very beginning (Gen 1:26–28): God has always desired to be in real relationship with the crown of His creation, through whom the whole cosmos would be brought to completion.¹¹ Election, therefore, is not an end to itself. Rather, it is a crucial part of God's covenant plan for the redemption of the created order. Yet, within God's sovereign desire for maximum salvation, covenant also demands a real response.¹²

The core reference point for covenant and election is God's choice of Abraham. The ultimate purpose of that choice was that through Abraham all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:1–3; cf. Gal 3:8), and Abraham's response to that covenant offer really mattered. God did not choose Abraham in distinction to the nations but on behalf of the nations. Israel was chosen to be a kingdom of priests, the ones through whom all the peoples of the earth would come to worship the one true God. The salvation-historical script from which the writers of the New Testament are always working is that God's elective covenantal purposes through Israel have come to fruition in the person and work of Christ breaking forth in a church that is world-wide, composed of believing Jews *and* Gentiles, the sign that the covenant with Abraham to redeem the world is being fulfilled.¹³ Election is covenantal.

Christocentric

Second, election is *Christocentric*. This speaks to the where (and how), the location (and means), of election. Where does election take place? *In Christ*. How? *Through Christ*. God's ultimate purposes for creation are grounded in the life, death, and resurrection of the Son. All that was promised to, in, and through Israel has been fulfilled in Christ. In Christ, the universal need for the salvation of humankind by God was met in the particular appearing and ministry of the God-Man. Paul speaks of believers being chosen and predestined “in Him” (Eph 1:4, 11) and predestined to be adopted “through Jesus Christ” (v. 5). Paul tells the Romans that they

¹¹Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006), 17; William J. Dumbrell, *Creation and Covenant: A Theology of Old Testament Covenants* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1984), 27.

¹²See, i.e., Deut 29:14–21. Israel is reaffirming the covenant promised to the patriarchs and to future generations. However, if there is an individual man or woman who boasts, “I have peace with God though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart,” the Lord will “single him out” from the people for destruction (vv. 18–21). Although the covenant is for the whole community, the individual must respond in faith in order to benefit from those corporate covenant promises.

¹³William J. Dumbrell, “Abraham and the Abrahamic Covenant in Galatians 3:1–14,” in *The Gospel to the Nations: Perspectives on Paul's Mission*, ed. Peter Bolt and Mark Thompson (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 19, 29. Paul asserts this connection between Abraham, election, the gospel, and the nations in Gal 3:8: “The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘All the nations of the earth will be blessed in you.’” Cf. Rom 4:13–25.

are “predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren” (8:29). Christ is the Elect One (Luke 9:35; 23:35 and 1 Peter 1:20; 2:4, 6). Through this One Man, through the universal and unlimited nature of His atonement, all people are now under the aegis of God’s electing love. God’s desire to have a people for Himself is secured by what has been accomplished in Christ. Those individuals who are united with Christ by faith are the elect, not by virtue of what they have done, but by virtue of what Christ has done. Through Christ, God’s covenant offer to Israel is now an offer He makes to the whole world, but, as it was with individual Israelites, so it must be with individual sinners—they must respond in faith (Deut 29:19–21). Moreover, as the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit, the elect are now the gracious means through which the gospel of Christ, the power of salvation, goes out to the whole world. The church, in becoming ever more like Christ, puts the glory of God on display before the nations so that all might come to repentance and faith.

Categorical

Third, election is *categorical*. This addresses the *who*, the subject, of election: God alone. In sovereign freedom alone, the Father has chosen the Son, and, in sovereign freedom alone, the Son has submitted Himself to the Father (John 5:18–30). In and through the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Father elected to have a people for Himself in whom and through whom He will fulfill His covenant to redeem the world. Like His decision to create, His decision to elect is non-contingent and unconditional. God initiates and superintends election, and His decision to have a people for Himself cannot be stopped. He will accomplish what He has determined to accomplish because He is God. Election is of grace. God’s choice of Israel was not based on her present or future worthiness, but on God’s free decision alone. Indeed, God fulfills that commitment perfectly and completely in Christ. God’s choice to have an eschatological people in Christ mirrors His election of Israel. God does not elect this people because He foresees that they will behave righteously. He elects them through categorical freedom, grace, and love. Because God’s electing purposes are based on His gracious decision alone, He can provide this salvation for anyone.

Concurrent

Fourth, election is concurrent, which relates to the *when* of election, addressing the issues of time and eternity and the movements of sovereignty and free will. While Calvinists speak of election as unconditional and happening from eternity and Arminians see it as conditional and happening in time, the Scriptures affirm elements of both views. God’s total sovereignty and people’s real responsibility in salvation are “simultaneously true.”¹⁴ To diminish God’s

¹⁴Kenneth Keathley, “The Work of God: Salvation,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 707. “Some advocates of the concurrent election position appeal to

sovereignty in salvation (or anything else) leaves the outcome of human destiny subject to doubt and beyond God's control. To diminish human responsibility is to concede causal determinism, reducing human decision-making to a farce. Yet, Ken Keathley notes, "The Bible so congruently interweaves divine and human actions that it is a mystery where one ends and the other begins (cf. John 6)."¹⁵ Concurrence in election means that God's sovereignty in election extends ultimately to the individual believer in such a way that, without God's electing, initiating, and superintending, no individual has the hope of salvation. It, however, also means that the free response of humans to God's electing activity is real and essential to salvation.¹⁶

Corporate

Finally, election is *corporate*, speaking to the *what*, the object of election.¹⁷ Election is the outworking of God's desire to save all. It is expressed in His desire to have a *people* for Himself. When the choice of individuals is raised in the Scriptures, it always refers to God's activity through that individual to bring about His purposes for maximum salvation. The concept of election is not focused on the question, "How does God save individuals?" The Bible answers that question clearly, but with a different concept: faith. Individuals are saved by grace through faith in Christ. This is not to say that the election of a people and the salvation of individuals are unrelated. Because Christ is the Elect One, the people of God are elect in and through Him. Because Christ is the Savior of each individual by faith, then a proper theological implication is that union with Christ makes an individual a member of the elect. Since the Son is freely chosen to bring about the existence of the elect, the Son Himself is the first member, the image for those who are predestined to conform to it, making Christ "the firstborn among many brothers" (Rom 8:29). Therefore, the corporate entity is no "empty set."¹⁸ Because maximum salvation was always the purpose of election, the fact that multitudes have come to faith and multitudes are yet to come is simply the intended outcome of God's sovereign activity in election.

Election in Romans 9–11

This five-fold matrix of election in Scripture structures the following soteriological claim: election is God's sovereign, unstoppable, promised plan to save a multitudinous people for

God's timelessness, others base their arguments on his ability to know even hypothetical situations (this ability is called *middle knowledge*), while still others argue that, since the Bible clearly teaches concurrence but does not provide an explanation about how concurrence works, then the matter should be left as a mystery."

¹⁵Ibid., 719.

¹⁶This is essentially Millard Erickson's view in *Christian Theology*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 382–87.

¹⁷William Klein, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 21.

¹⁸William Klein, "Is Corporate Election Virtual Election?," available at <http://ebookbrowse.com/klein-is-corporate-election-merely-virtual-election-pdf-d46693980> (accessed October 3, 2012).

himself through faith in Christ alone. While this plan is sufficient to save every sinner, those who are excluded from it are excluded only by their own decisions within the collective rebellion and brokenness of humankind, an outcome that functions fully within God's sovereign purposes to bring maximum salvation by faith.

This matrix reveals that the texts most often cited as *proof* that election means God's fixed choice of some and not others are actually making the *opposite* point. Romans 9–11 is arguably the "pillar passage" for the Calvinist view of election, but it actually fits beautifully into this matrix and reveals that God's saving intentions are for all, not just a select few. There is no question that the election of Israel forms the basis for these chapters. Whatever election means here it must be collated with what God was doing in His choice of Israel. Paul's point in the letter from beginning to end is that, as the Jewish apostle to the Gentiles, he is proclaiming that God's commitment to bring salvation to the world through Israel has been fulfilled in Israel's Messiah and through the Messiah's People. In Romans 9–11, *covenant* is the driving force. The question of 9:6 (Has God's covenant with Israel failed?) is answered in 11:25–26 (Israel's present resistance to the gospel is temporary, purposed by God for maximum salvation among the Gentiles, which will result in *all* Israel being saved.). The conclusion of this plan is exclaimed in verse 32: "that He might have mercy on them all." Who benefits from these covenant promises? *Anyone* who *believes* (Rom 10:9–13). *Concurrence* is in view in the ease with which Paul speaks of God's absolute sovereignty in the plan of salvation (Rom 9:6–29) and then turns in the next verse to find Israel's own unbelief as the precipitating cause of God's current rejection of them, the remedy for which is faith in Christ alone for anyone who will confess and believe (9:30–10:16).

Christocentrism is on display in the core of this passage in Rom 10:5–17. Christ is the fulfillment of the new covenant promised to Israel in Deut 30:12–14 (Rom 10:6–8). Belief in the Lordship of the Living Christ alone results in salvation for *all people*. The *categorical* nature of this sovereign plan to save all is on display especially in chapter 9. God, indeed, can save whomever He wants however He wants, but the question is, "Who does God want to save?" Does He want to save certain ones and not others? That hardly seems to be the point of a passage that ends with the proclamation that there will be mercy for all. The point of Romans 9 is that nothing can stop God's plan for maximum salvation, not even Israel's unfaithfulness. In fact, her unfaithfulness is actually a part of the plan to bring salvation to the whole world (9:17–18; 11:11–15). God is hardening Israel for a little while, not according to some hidden will to save some and not others, but according to His revealed will to save anyone and everyone who believes.

Finally, election in Romans 9–11 is *corporate*. Paul is talking about God's dealings with two groups, Jews and Gentiles, who are being made into one group (Rom 11:16–24). God's choice of Israel (and His sovereign administration of Israel's unbelief) has resulted in His choice of all who believe. Again, not everyone will hear the good news ("How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?") and not everyone will believe ("All day long I have lifted My hands to a disobedient and obstinate people"). But Paul's point about election in Romans 9–11 is clear: God never just gives up on people. No one is outside of His reach or His mercy. Anyone can be

saved. His electing purposes for maximum salvation are unstoppable, yet they fully include the real responses of people to the gospel.

Conclusion

It is inaccurate to say that God elects some individuals and not others to salvation on the basis of his inscrutable decrees. Calvinism's reading evacuates the biblical concept of faith, which requires real freedom as necessary for salvation. God saves individuals by providing salvation through Christ in the announcement of the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. The individual who responds to the offer of the gospel with repentance and faith is saved. By virtue of an individual's being saved by faith in the Elect One, he is now a member of the elect. "God chose me," then can only mean that God has always planned to bring salvation to sinners in a way that takes seriously both their radical sinfulness and their responsibility to respond in faith. It cannot mean that God chooses some and not others without respect to their response of faith to the gospel.

Biblical election, therefore, is part of the answer to the question, "How does God fulfill His sovereign, loving desire to save sinners?" The answer is that despite the universal and ubiquitous rebellion of all men, God decided, in Christ, to choose a people to whom salvation would come and through whom salvation would go out to all people, no matter what. Therefore, the burden of election language in the Bible is not the demonstration of how it is that God wants to save anyone. That is an Augustinian concern. Election in Scripture stands with the announcement that God wants to save *everyone*. God is not looking out over the mass of the damned, pinching his nose and picking out a few. He is looking at the world He loved so much that He made a way for whoever believes in Him to have life, and He has guaranteed that He will have such a people in Christ through whom the gospel will go out to the whole world.

What does this view of election mean for Southern Baptists? It means that we can say that God moved heaven and earth to bring the gospel to sinners like us. He did so through Christ and through the long chain of the faithfulness and obedience of His people. We are the beneficiaries of His electing purposes when we respond in faith to that gospel preached to us, and, when we take that good news to others, we put the electing purposes of God on display. Election means that we did not save ourselves. Until the gospel was preached to us, until the Spirit of God moved in that preaching, we were hopeless and helpless, undeserving of and uninterested in a relationship with God. Yet, God refused to stop. He has chosen to pursue His rebellious creatures to the uttermost. The end will reveal His elective purposes were not designed for a great exclusion but a maximum salvation.