

Free Grace and Views of Election

The doctrine of election always provokes a lively discussion among Christians who have a variety of ways to explain it. There is no uniform agreement about election within the Free Grace position. Essentially, what is debated is how God's sovereign will coalesces with man's free agency (or his response). The word *election* means to be *chosen* or *selected* and is often associated with other theological words like *predestination* and *foreknowledge*. In brief summary, here are the basic views of election most frequently encountered, though every view has its own variations.

1. Monergistic, unconditional, pre-temporal election. This view holds that a person's salvation is by God's sovereign decree in eternity past before creation or before anyone believes. It in no way depends on man's own agency, will, or faith. The grace of salvation cannot be resisted and the gift of divine faith necessarily results in a life of faithfulness and good works that perseveres to the end of life. God is the only one who acts, thus the term *monergistic*. This view is sometimes called Dortian Calvinism, High Calvinism, or Reformed Calvinism identified by the TULIP acronym. Opponents of this view claim it makes God inconsistent with His other attributes like love and actually dehumanizes man by taking away his free agency, which diminishes God's glory because the gospel is not offered to all and the elect cannot refuse it. This view is not popular with Free Grace proponents.

2. Synergistic, pre-temporal election. Some who call themselves moderate Calvinists recognize God's election in eternity past or before one believes, but also recognize the necessity of man's faith to actualize that salvation. God's will and man's response are working together, compatible, or synergistic. Since the Bible affirms both God's will and man's agency in salvation, they are congruent, or work in harmony. Some who believe this prefer to view man's will working within God's greater sovereign will. How God's will and man's will work together cannot easily be understood or explained. TULIP Calvinists object that man has no freedom to respond to the gospel and consider such a view of faith as a human work. This moderate Calvinism is held by some Free Grace followers.

3. Pre-temporal, conditional election. God knows who will eventually believe in Jesus Christ and elects them to salvation. God's foreknowledge is understood as the ability to know the future, but has no determining quality. Since God elects those He knows will respond to the gospel, election is conditioned on man's response. This foresight election is the traditional Arminian position. Some object that this view makes election totally meaningless since it is all conditioned on man's response. Some in the Free Grace position have adopted the basics of this view while rejecting other Arminian tenets.

4. Pre-temporal, corporate election. While all the other views listed here treat election as directed towards individuals, this view sees election in relation to Christ and the church. In eternity past, God elected His Son, Jesus Christ. All who believe are placed in that elect group "in Christ," the church. An individual's salvation is not necessarily foreseen. This view was popularized by theologian Karl Barth, but in his view *all* men were elect in Christ—some did not yet know it. Some object that this view ignores some Scriptures that describe election as applied to individuals and also reject the universalism it allows. Some Free Grace proponents are comfortable with the idea of corporate election but reject other aspects of this view, like universalism.

5. Pre-temporal, middle-knowledge election. Also known as Molinism, this view holds that God in eternity past chose to create, from all the possible scenarios, the one that brought about His desired results (sovereignty) using truly free moral decisions (free will). Knowing exhaustively what people could do, would do, and thus will do in any scenario, God created the best scenario and knows who will believe in Christ. Some would argue that this does not

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answer the question of why God chose any scenario that allows some to reject Him, yet others who hold the Free Grace position think this view best reconciles God's sovereign will with man's free agency.

6. Atemporal, qualitative election. This view does not see the word *election* referring to individual salvation, but to God's description of believers as "choice." Those who believe in Christ are those who value His Son and who will glorify God in their lives and service, thus they are designated qualitatively as *choice* people. The Bible never speaks of election for salvation, but election for service. Some object that this view takes unwarranted liberty in its definition of election and some of the passages where it is found. In recent times, this view has been espoused by some of the Free Grace persuasion.

7. Trans-temporal, congruent election. While election is usually viewed in a linear time-delineated way, it should be viewed through God's nature that encompasses and goes beyond all time. Though the Bible describes salvation as something decreed by God in the "past" but also presents it as a possibility in the "present," there is no contradiction because God is trans-temporal, that is, He encompasses the past, present, and future. God exists in one "eternal now," so His experience of man and his salvation (or condemnation) is complete and thus congruent in terms of divine will and human agency. What God knows He determines and what He determines He knows. God's will for an individual's salvation is in the past as much as in the present or the future, though man's response is confined to his present time on earth. Opponents might say that this view dismisses the meaning of time language in the Scriptures, but some in the Free Grace position find it a good option.

Evaluating these views

The view with the most credibility is the one that harmonizes the most Scriptures. Some of the more crucial questions that should be answered are:

- Though each view has a theological bias, which one can be supported best from the Scriptures themselves? (This brief study could not begin to answer this!)
- Which view is most consistent with a biblical view of God and all of His attributes?
- Which view is most consistent with a biblical view of man created in the image of God and affected by the fall?
- Those of a Free Grace persuasion would especially want to know: which view is most consistent with the biblical view of grace as unconditional, faith as a legitimate human response, and salvation by grace through faith apart from human merit or works either at the front end of salvation or the back end?

Conclusion

Christians should understand that the debate about God's predestining will and man's free agency existed before Christianity in ancient Judaism, Greek philosophy, and many other religions. That should help us see that the issue will not be resolved quickly, much less to everyone's agreement. It is legitimate to ask whether it is even possible to explain everything about God, or whether some things are beyond our ability to fully understand and explain. And if we could explain everything about God, what kind of God would He be? We should study the doctrine of election and form opinions, but all with a great deal of humility and from an honest treatment of the Scriptures. If so, there will be no conflict with the gospel of salvation by free grace through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!" – Romans 11:33