

ELECTION AND SALVATION
IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

BY
PAUL D. ADAMS

God is sovereign over salvation. Humans are responsible in salvation. These two truths are the hallmarks of the doctrine of election in the Gospel according to John. It is admitted that there is a certain evasiveness to sovereignty and responsibility when both are held to be true. Nevertheless, for John, the picture of salvation and election is not complete without: (1) the certainty of God's redemptive purposes coming to pass within an historical framework and (2) the response of people to that which God has graciously revealed in history. In spite of the mystery, both are true for John and must be true for us.

On the one side of this issue are those who see a strict determinism in the Fourth Gospel. God determines salvation is effected by Him alone, and human response has no part in the equation. Various texts are used in support of this position (Jn 1:13; 5:21; 6:44, 65, 70; 8:47; 13:18; 15:16, 19; 17:2, 6, 9). On the other side are those who maintain that salvation depends upon human decision to follow, believe, or receive Jesus. Passages in favor of this view are many (e.g., Jn 1:11-12; 3:11-12, 16, 18, 36; 5:40; 6:27, 29, 40; 7:17, 37-38; 8:31, 51; 12:36).¹ In other words, God is the One solely responsible for saving those who have believed yet, at the same time, He demands those whom He saves to believe! Is God talking out of both sides of His mouth? How can this doctrine of election and salvation in John's Gospel be made harmonious? Or, can it? Some tension must remain.

In this paper I will attempt to reduce a *small* portion of the tension these positions breed. To persistently affirm human responsibility in salvation at the expense of God's sovereignty is, at least, naive. To rigidly affirm God's sovereignty in salvation apart from human response is, at best, narrow. John's Gospel, perhaps more so than the Synoptics, presents many texts to whet the appetite and explore the depth and breadth of this difficult, yet rich, doctrine of election and salvation. The intent of this work is to reduce the tension where John himself has been clear while paying respect to that portion of tension which must remain.

¹G. A. Turner, "Soteriology in the Gospel of John," *JETS* 14 (1976): 270-277.

In John's Prologue the Incarnate Word enters the realm of human existence and sheds His light. This light (viz. the Word Incarnate) shines on every person (1:9). A clear distinction between men results where some reject the light (1:11; 3:19-20) while others follow it (1:12; 3:21; 8:12). The question as to whether or not the light *causes* the distinction or merely exposes it is pertinent. If Carson is right, that φωτίζει has as its primary meaning "to shed light upon", *i.e.* "to make visible. . . ,"² then the light is the means by which the distinction is made manifest rather than it being the cause of the distinction. This serves only to illustrate the impartiality of God in offering salvation. While it remains true that men, in general, love darkness instead of light because of, or as a consequence of, their evil, it is also wonderfully true that some respond positively and come into the light only to find that the Light Himself has enabled their response (Jn 3:19-21).

After healing the invalid at the Pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath, Jesus encounters a great deal of opposition from the Jews (Jn 5). He meets this opposition with a strong appeal to the Scriptures which testify about Him (5:39). Diligence of the Jews to study the Scriptures was not a virtue in itself. In fact, it was a vice because study was viewed as the means of obtaining eternal life. This should have been a sound rebuke to Gnosticism in John's day as well. Jesus rebukes the Jews for refusing to take their study to its logical conclusion, viz. the Man behind the book. Ignorance does not excuse the unbelievers, rather it indicts them! If people are characterized by anything, it is a determination to remain contentedly in darkness. "Tender eagerness to save, met by a stubborn refusal to be saved"³ are signs of the sovereignty/responsibility juncture that begins to unfold in the Fourth Gospel.

In the Bread of Life Discourse, Jesus identifies Himself to be the "real food" of which men must partake in order to have eternal life. After experiencing a miraculous object lesson, as well as enjoying a satisfying meal, the people eagerly looked for Jesus on the other side of the lake. Motivated by the satisfying meal rather than the significance of the meal, the people are

²D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 124.

³Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 331.

entreated by Jesus to do the work God requires which is to “. . . believe in the one he sent” (6:29). Their spiritual dullness is displayed when they ask for yet another “miraculous sign” (6:30; 34) which Jesus refuses them and, instead, points to Himself (vv. 35ff).

The responsibility of belief, or “coming to Jesus,” rests with the people (6:36), yet those who come to Jesus in faith *somehow* belong to the Father and are given to Jesus (vv. 37, 39). At this point an important question would be, is the coming or believing a result of this belonging-to-God relationship? There is a sense in which it can be no other way, for the context indicates that the issue is God’s redemptive purposes (vv. 38-40). These purposes can *never* be thwarted when the entire salvation-historical perspective is in view. It is foreign to biblical thought that one could have such an intimate relationship with the Father and yet never come to or believe in the revelation of His Son.

An even more important question remains. How is this coming/believing accomplished? Jesus emphatically says it is God who enables the coming and believing (6:44, 65). Carson states, “The world chooses, but by itself it cannot (because it will not) choose the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.”⁴ The reverse is equally true that the world will not (because it cannot) choose God’s revelation in Christ. There is an ontological problem with all fallen humans, being left to ourselves, that so profoundly prohibits our coming and believing. A seriously wounded animal left to itself is without hope apart from some outside help. Likewise, we must have something happen to our very being which endows us with the capacity to respond in faith. Ought does not necessarily imply can (contra Kant)! Ultimately, the “existence of [the] people of God can be explained only on the basis of God’s plan. . . , will, and action, not from a series of human resolves.”⁵

This in no way removes human responsibility. From the human side, a person still must respond in faith. A condition for eternal life must still be met by everyone. Jesus, many times

⁴D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*, (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 167.

⁵Colin Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), s.v. "Elect," by L. Coenen.

over, implores that “if anyone eats. . . “ (6:51), “. . . unless you eat . . . and drink. . . “ (v. 53), “whoever eats. . . and drinks. . . “ (v. 54). Again, “whoever eats. . . and drinks. . . “ (v. 56), “. . . the one who feeds on me. . . “ and “he who feeds on this bread. . . “ (vv. 57, 58) is assured eternal life.

So, this belonging-to-God relationship is accomplished by God’s enabling the one who chooses to recognize their malnourished soul. God enables the recognition and the actual coming since, the “Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing” (6:63). As a result, this recognition and coming indicates that he belongs to the Father.

From the divine side (or God’s vantage point), this belonging-to-God relationship must have existed prior to it becoming manifest in the fabric of salvation-history (cf. Eph 1:4, 11). If not, then in what sense did those who were given to Jesus belong to the Father? It may be true that “. . . every living soul belongs to me [the Sovereign Lord]” (Ez 18:4), but in John this belonging means far more than a generic sense. This *a priori* relationship is the basis upon which God draws men to Himself. It is important to note, too, that He must have some knowledge of those upon whom He exerts this drawing activity. The alternative is that God arbitrarily draws men, hoping some will come to Him.

Similarly, God does not decide something and then know it to be true. Nor does He know something to be true and then decide it to be the case. God’s knowing and deciding (or, ordaining) are without respect to time. The actuality of salvation and election takes place within the parameters of time but are known and ordained from all eternity past. For John, the fundamental starting-point of election is found in the relationship the elect have with God. This is against Klein who argues “. . . when Jesus supplies the basis or explanation for their place in that group [viz. those whom God gives to Jesus], it turns out to be their faith.”⁶ It is admitted that human faith is necessary to complete the paradigm of election and salvation, but it cannot be the

⁶William W. Klein, *The New Chosen People, A Corporate View of Election*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 140.

basis for the relationship of the elect. Rather, it is the relationship of the elect to the Father (viz. ownership) which is the ground for belief (cf. 6:44, 65).

This relationship the elect have with God may have existed prior to its manifestation in salvation history, but this does not remove the responsibility to believe. Belief is still essential (8:24). Jesus rebukes the Jews for not believing Him (8:45-46). The *a priori* relationship and the responsibility to believe reflects both the divine and human side of election and salvation. God may be the ultimate cause of the individual's salvation, but He cannot be the *only* cause. "In God's *providential strategy* he remains the final cause of everything but makes use of. . . . people as efficient causes to achieve the ends of his preceptive will. Hence in any historical event on planet earth there may be several causal factors."⁷

In the Good Shepherd Discourse Jesus repeatedly refers to the flock as His own (10:3, 4, 14, 16, 26, 27). The sheep are said to be His because they follow Him (v. 4), know Him (v. 14), listen to Him (v. 16), and believe Him (v. 26). Yet, they follow Him because they are His sheep. Both statements are true since, for John, the sheep and the Shepherd have a responsibility in the constitution of the flock. All of this activity on the part of the sheep is a result of their belonging to the Father in some special way (vv. 14, 26).

It must be kept in mind that Jesus is addressing His opponents here and not those who constitute the believing fold (cf. 9:41; 10:24-26). "Jesus does not say that his opponents are not among his sheep because they do not believe, but that they do not believe because they are not among his sheep."⁸ The flock cannot consist of the unbelieving. At the same time, it must be said that there is nothing indigenous to the nature of the sheep which constitutes their ability to recognize the shepherd for, ". . . the knowledge of Christ is not the natural possession of any man. Faith is always a gift of God."⁹

⁷Bruce A. Demarest and Gordon R. Lewis, *Integrative Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 318.

⁸Carson, *Sovereignty*, 190.

⁹Morris, *John*, 520.

John insists that there is no excuse for not believing in Jesus (12:37). Jesus had left more than adequate testimony of Himself and He warns there will come a time when darkness will overtake the one who persistently refuses to walk in the light (12:35). The unresponsiveness of the Jews demands an explanation and John finds in the Scriptures all the reasoning necessary to explain this phenomenon.¹⁰

John quotes Isaiah 53:1; 6:9f. to illustrate that God had foreseen this response all along. This reaction of these Jews did not take God by surprise. Scripture foretold that these Jews would not believe and, in that sense, it had to be fulfilled. This prevision of Scripture does not necessarily mean that it was the cause of the reaction. It merely describes those events which will take place. Because they are described in Scripture they are *certain*, but they are conditioned upon their actualization. Godet says it clearly.

He [God] does not *foresee* an event which is for us yet to come, but that He *sees* it, absolutely as we behold a present event; . . . consequently, when He declares it at any moment whatsoever, He does not *foretell* it, but *describes* it as a spectator and witness. . . Once foretold, the event undoubtedly cannot fail to happen, because the eye of God cannot have presented to Him as *existing* that which will not be. But the event does not exist because God has seen it; God, on the contrary, has seen it because it *will be*, or rather because to His view it already *is*.¹¹

The determination of these Jews in refusing to believe, coupled with the fact that it was necessary that Scripture be fulfilled, is the reason God blinds their eyes and deadens their hearts (Jn 12:39-40). This is not simply a reaction of God to the unbelief of humankind. There is a sense in which God does not *react* to anything. He is *proactive* in that all which comes about in history is sovereignly under His control, including the unbelief of the Jews. This does not exonerate them. Unbelief is still a decision of the will and to persistently reject the revelation of God in His Son inevitably leads to an inability to receive it.

This inability is facilitated by God as He blinds the eye and deadens the heart. It is also necessitated by God in that He declared it would be the case. So, in unbelief there is divine and

¹⁰F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 270.

¹¹Frederic L. Godet, *Commentary on John's Gospel*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1978), 794.

human causation undergirded with divine necessity. Persistent unbelief of the Jews (note the imperfect, *ejpivsteuon* in 12:37) is the basis for the blinding and hardening. If the gospel message does not quicken, then it deadens!¹²

For John's readers this must have been a strong warning to believe in Jesus as Messiah. Up to this point in John's Gospel they were exposed to seven miraculous signs (and possibly many others that were not recorded cf. 20:30). The Jews were given every good reason for believing in the Person of Jesus. Not to do so would be to risk being blinded forever to the truth of the gospel message. At the same time, it must have brought great comfort to those Jewish disciples who did believe. God's sovereign elective purposes were being accomplished in them!

The language of "choosing" in the Fourth Gospel is carefully used by John (6:70; 13:18; 15:16,19). In each instance it is Jesus who takes the initiative and not the chosen ones. Purposes for the existence of the chosen ones are linked to the context and theology of John.

In the first account Jesus asks the twelve if they want to forsake Him like the others (6:67). Peter declares, on behalf of the disciples, that they know who Jesus is. Carson suggests that Peter's response is "pretentious."¹³ No doubt, there is a hint of haughtiness on the part of Peter. However, the reply of Jesus in 6:70 is meant to show not just Peter but all the Twelve that they were chosen by Him (note the plural *uJma*). His choice of them is not predicated upon their ability to see and know who Jesus is but upon His purposes alone. One purpose is to fulfill Scripture (13:18, 17:12). Once again, this is not to say that Scripture is the sole cause of its fulfillment. God's choosing includes the willful (hence, responsible) decisions of people - even those who have Satan behind their activity. John is deeply concerned here to show that Jesus (like God) is sovereign over all that occurs in history. There is no idea of double predestination - only sovereignty. "An ordinance from all eternity, under which God divided people in advance into two classes, good and evil, chosen and rejected, is never even mentioned in John."¹⁴

¹²Morris, *John*, 604.

¹³Carson, *John*, 304.

¹⁴R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, vol. 2 (New York: Herder and Herder; London: Burns & Oates, 1968, 1980, 1982), 264.

After setting an example for His disciples to follow, Jesus insists only those who actually follow the example are blessed (13:4-17). Yet, He qualifies “. . . you will be blessed if you do them” with “I am not referring to all of you. . . “ The subtitle division is unfortunate in the NIV. Not all to whom Jesus is speaking are being referred to. Westcott states, “The choice here spoken of is the historical choice to the apostolate. The thought of election to salvation is quite foreign to the context.”¹⁵

But the idea of being chosen unto salvation in 13:18 is not so completely removed. Jesus simply says He knows those whom He has chosen. Some of the chosen ones are already clean (13:10). If those present were not chosen unto salvation then in what sense were they clean? Although, not everyone present was clean (13:10), Jesus does know the disposition of each; clean or unclean. When Jesus says He is not referring to all of the disciples, He means that some (viz. Judas Iscariot) will not humbly serve others in spite of knowing it to be the way of blessing (13:10-11, 17). The fact that Judas Iscariot betrays Jesus proves Scripture (and Jesus) to be accurate (13:18, 19).

Enjoying a special relationship with Jesus carries with it responsibilities: obedience to Jesus' commands, love for other believers, and effective prayer (15:10, 12, 16). Lest believers get too comfortable in their relationship, Jesus reminds them that He is the One who initiated it and therefore has the right to expect a certain outcome (15:16, 19). This choosing is not only to service but to salvation. In this context, it is salvation which is the basis for the service, to have it any other way is unthinkable for John.

Being chosen by Jesus was to be a continual reminder to the disciples of their purpose. It was also to be a reminder that they were chosen out of the world (15:19) to which they belonged at one time. The moral status of the world from which they once came characterized their very beings. Yet, the disciples were never to forget that it was Christ's gracious choice that they be His. As aliens of the world, the disciples were to rest in the fact that their Master and Friend has

¹⁵B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 193.

chosen them out of the world and had, Himself, overcome the world (16:33). These explicit references to Christ's sovereignty in election were to provide great comfort to the disciples who were deeply concerned about losing Jesus.

John 17 is perhaps the most prolific reference to the elect belonging God. The Father grants the Son authority over all people. The Son in turn gives eternal life to all those given to Him by the Father (v. 2). This gift of eternal life is not given to all men indiscriminately.¹⁶ Only those given to the Son by the Father receive it. This implies, once again, a certain relationship existing between the Father and the elect, viz. ownership. Jesus affirms this in vv. 6, 9, 24. Carson rightly states, “. . . in a profound sense they belonged to God antecedently to Jesus' ministry. . . .”¹⁷

This “prior-to” relationship does not imply any strict determinism for John. Simply because it was foreseen by God (and Jesus, v. 20) does not necessarily intimate passive compliance on the part of the elect. Their response (even though inevitable) was still necessary to complete the design of election in salvation history.

It could be said that election is certain though conditional. This is against Good who writes, “God chose individuals to salvation before the foundation of the world solely upon causes within Himself and not upon the basis of foreseen faith. . . .in the recipients of that salvation.”¹⁸ It has been shown earlier that God's purposes include the response of individuals who voluntarily (though prompted by God) must come to him in faith (e.g., 6:40, 44). And the “efficient cause” of individuals responding in faith is part of the puzzle of divine election. While God may be wooing individuals like a lover, He never uses the tactics of a terrorist!

Earlier it was established that the basis for the response of faith by the elect is found in the eternal relationship that the Father has with His own. There must have been an element of divine knowledge (or foreknowledge?) involved in this divine decision to choose. If not, then how in

¹⁶Morris, *John*, 719.

¹⁷Carson, *John*, 558.

¹⁸Kenneth H. Good, *God's Gracious Purpose*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 43.

the world did God *know* who would respond to Him? The alternative is that God, the architect, has an eternal plan of redemption but no knowledge of how this plan unfolds. Given that God is a simple, indivisible Being then, ontologically, there can be no sequence in the ordination of events and His knowledge of those events: both are necessary and simultaneous.

This attempt to separate God's knowledge from His decrees appears to be a maneuver to show an inevitable chain of divine causation in election apart from any human link. But what can be made of Jesus' prayer for those who have yet to believe (taking tw'n pisteuovntwn to be futuristic present, 17:20b)? How did Jesus *know* there would be more than just the immediate circle of disciples if He did not somehow *foresee* their faith? (note, these future-tense believers are the "other sheep" of whom Jesus insists must be brought into the fold also, cf. 10:16). He must have had the vantage point of being able to see ahead to those who would believe. Otherwise, this particular request (in 17:20) implicates Jesus as presumptuous and is reduced to nothing more than "wishful thinking." Likewise, Jesus must have had some kind of prescience regarding Peter's death (cf. Jn 21:19) or else John could not have said *why* Jesus spoke this way. The other option, of course, is that John is subject to anachronism.¹⁹

The fact of God seeing ahead does not make Him or His purposes contingent. Only the event of believing is contingent or conditional upon its actualization. Even though election to salvation is conditioned upon those individuals responding in faith, it is positively sure and certain *on the basis* of a pre-existent relationship with the Father.

So, the consummation of election includes not only this existence of a relationship with the Father but the actualization of a contingent event (*viz.* a response of faith) in the time-space arena. From the human view, the event of salvation is contingent upon a response of faith. From the divine view the salvation event is so certain as to be actualized in God's understanding (since His knowing and deciding are without respect to time). God's decrees are *in accordance with* His knowledge (which includes the actualization of contingencies) and not separate from them (cf. I

¹⁹On John's Gospel being concerned with actual historicity see Carson, *John*, Introduction, 21-104.

Pt 1:2). Carl Henry speaks to this when he writes, “. . . he [God] foreordains even contingent events (cf. Gen. 45:8, 50:20, Prov.16:33) and knows and appoints even the duration of our lives (Job 14:5, Ps. 39:4). The alternative would be a universe in which God is as uninformed and as uncertain about what will happen from moment to moment as are human beings.”²⁰

Even though (from the human side) election is conditional, it does not take away from the fact of its certainty. The relationship which the elect have with God is the basis upon which it is manifest in history. Chronologically, this relationship the Father has with the elect is pre-historical and extends into eternity; hence, it is certain. Logically, that relationship must (and will) manifest itself in salvation history; hence, it is conditional.

The impetuses behind this relationship are the sovereign purposes of God, one of which is the glorification of Jesus (17: 5, 10b, 24). Similarly, Jesus’ glorification (viz. His crucifixion/resurrection/exaltation) was both conditional and certain. Jesus came to do the will of His Father which was to manifest itself in history (6:38; also, I Pt 1:20). The implementation of God’s will in redemptive history began with Jesus’ incarnation and was consummated by His ascension. Jesus said, “the time has come” for the Father to glorify Him (17:1). When this condition was realized (viz. when the right time arrived) then the Father would glorify the Son. Jesus declares that the condition for glorifying the Father is met.

Involved with this “right-time” condition is an even more pointed observation in 17:1. Jesus asks “Glorify your Son, *that your Son may glorify you.*” Assuming it here to be fully telic,²¹ the end or purpose toward which the Son’s glorification moves is God’s glory. The means for this is Jesus’ death and exaltation. But at the time of the utterance of this prayer, the means had not yet been realized. “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence. . . “ does not mean that “the glorification takes place even as Jesus speaks.”²² Much had to transpire in salvation history (e.g.,

²⁰Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 6 (Waco: Word, 1983), 85-86.

²¹Morris, *John*, 718.

²²Carson, *John*, 653.

the arrest, trial, sentence and denial of Jesus) before the Son's glorification brought glory to the Father. This only serves to illustrate that God's salvific purposes, though conditional, are certain.

That God has chosen people out of the world to be His does not imply "the exclusion of certain men from salvation because they were not chosen by the Father."²³ The reason men are excluded from salvation is because they do not believe in Jesus in spite of the amount of divine revelation given them (Jn 5:38-40, 6:36).

In Jn 12:37ff, the hardening is a result of persistent unbelief, yet it is also the reason given for the inability to believe (v. 39). Hardening and blinding could be viewed as both the cause and effect of unbelief. For John, it is the hardening and blinding which is the cause of unbelief (v. 39). But, it is also the effect because "such hardening is to be understood as a judgement upon a previous failure to believe and not as a hardening *ab initio* which entirely ruled out the possibility of belief."²⁴ The subject of the blinding and deadening is God. Just as in salvation God is the active agent whereby men are redeemed, so too, He is the One who hardens and condemns. Carson says it best when he states:

They [persistent unbelievers] are not forced into an unbelief they do not themselves want. When it is also remembered that the 'world' to which Jesus comes is already condemned, then the language of 12.37-43 need not be taken as reprobation on a par with election, but as realised eschatology of condemnation. As in 2 Thessalonians 2.10f., men who do not receive the love of truth are rewarded by God-sent delusion so that they will believe only lies. For these men the eschatological verdict has already come. For this reason they cannot believe. For them it is now too late.²⁵

In conclusion, John's emphasis is both the certainty of God's redemptive purposes unfolding in salvation history and the conditional responses of everyone to believe the revelation in His Son. The tension between these two propositions is not so great for John.

The Word Incarnate has entered salvation history to bring redemption to all who will believe. Only those who are enabled by God will come to Jesus. This coming is grounded in a relationship which already existed between the Father and His elect from all eternity past. The

²³I.H. Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, (London: Epworth, 1969), 179.

²⁴Marshall, *Kept*, 179.

²⁵Carson, *Sovereignty*, 196.

appointment of the elect by God was in accordance with His knowledge of those who would respond and not prior to nor subsequent to it. Both His knowledge and determinations are co-dependent upon each other. They transcend time and are simultaneous, thus certain. Yet, they are realized within the parameters of time, thus conditional.

However, a response of faith is required to complete the picture of election. Election is contingent upon this condition being met. Since God sets this condition it is certain to be actualized. The elect can never boast of their own resolve to meet this condition, since John makes it clear that it is God who enables the response of faith. For He is the ultimate cause (though not the only cause) of all things and stands behind each instance of movement in His creation.

John's design of election and salvation is consonant with the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of humankind. Both co-exist in such a way that God's redemptive purposes are never compromised. Indeed, He has already anticipated the final outcome of all which is yet to be. Like a conductor and composer, He has orchestrated each note and rhythm in the universe to perform His masterpiece of salvific history. Each movement is played in time and culminates in the grand finale which was in the mind of the Conductor/Composer from all eternity past.

Soli Deo gloria.