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### Does the Doctrine of Election Make God Unloving?

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### Introduction

The doctrine of election is a Christian tenet that has had revolutionary effects in the world. These effects are not always recognised, especially by Christians. Secular thinkers, however, such as Max Weber had recognised it.<sup>3</sup> Rather than recognising the positive revolutionary effects of the doctrine, Christian thinkers have

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<sup>1</sup> See his Ph.D. dissertation was on “The Significance of John Hick’s Concept of Religious Pluralism for Tolerance among Ònkò Yorùbá,” (University of Ibadan, 27 May 2004). He wrote with Fehintola Akangbe “The Nigerian Evangelical Fellowship,” in Ademola Ishola & Deji Ayegboyan (Eds.), *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience* (Lagos: Sceptre Prints Ltd., 2000), 174-283; he wrote “The Psycho-Religious Power of Modern Music,” *Journal of Humanities* 3:3 (OBITUN, 2001), 77-99; “‘God-Talk’ in Africa: Refining ‘Chance Philosophy’ for Continental Rebirth,” *Ibadan Journal of Multicultural/Multidisciplinary Studies* 8:2 (CASTALIA, 2202), 60-74; “The Place of Religion in Moral Experience,” *Ado Journal of Religions* 1:2 (2002), 27-36; and “Mark 2: 23 – 28: A Humanist Interpretation,” *Ado Journal of Religions* 2:2 (2002), 12-28.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.UnAdPortal.com](http://www.UnAdPortal.com).

<sup>3</sup> According to Max Weber in *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2002) and ebook [www.ne.jp/asahi/moriyuki/abukuma/weber/world/ethic/pro\\_eth\\_frame.html](http://www.ne.jp/asahi/moriyuki/abukuma/weber/world/ethic/pro_eth_frame.html), the Calvinistic doctrine of double predestination was the impetus to modern capitalism.

been occupied with whether the doctrine makes God unfair or unloving. However, the doctrine has given psychological boost, assurance, courage and stimulus to great Christian thinkers in history. Some of these are three of the great pillars of Protestantism.

Paul the Apostle, Aurelius Augustine of Hippo and John Calvin were three Christian leaders who combined deep religiosity with keen intellect. They combined deep faith with commanding intellectual astuteness. There are many others like Thomas Aquinas. But these three could be regarded as the father figures of Protestantism. They have inspired many revolutions not only in Christian history but even world history. As can be gleaned in their writings, the doctrine of election gave them confidence and urged them on in their struggles.

According to the teaching, “in the beginning” or even “before the foundation of the world”, God has unconditionally chosen some humans to be saved and leave others to destruction. However, those chosen for salvation and those for damnation were totally depraved in Adam. Both groups deserved perdition. But God in his sovereignty and mercy chose the elect for salvation and justly foreordained others to damnation. Is God fair, then, in doing this? Can we still regard God as loving, especially to the damned? These and similar questions have divided theologians.

The occupation of theologians with these and similar questions are not for speculative interest. The questions had serious implications for other doctrines. Beginning with the authority of the Bible, if the doctrine of election makes God unloving, we must find a way of explaining the clear biblical teachings on this. Similarly, the doctrine of God as loving is also biblical. These two teachings are clearly taught in the scriptures and cannot be wished away lightly. In what follows, it will be shown that these two teachings (that God elects and is loving) must be accepted together. The biblical basis for both will be presented with a suggestion on how to reconcile the two.

## **A. The Dilemma**

### **1. God Elects**

A primary reason why the doctrine of election is confusing to many Christians is because it is biblical. That is, it is clearly taught in the Bible. Hence, if a Christian claims to believe in the authority of the Bible s/he will be obligated to accept the doctrine. That God

loves is even more explicit and universally affirmed. Therefore, if the doctrine of election makes God unloving or unfair, the only thing a believer or religious thinker can do is to find a way of interpreting these biblical passages that are teaching election. The passages, however, are not easily manipulated. Some of them are explicit in their teaching. Hence, what an exegete who wants to deny this doctrine can do is to suppress or neglect the passages that are explicitly teaching the doctrine.

The passages can be found in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is more forthright in this, going beyond what many Christians would like to affirm of the doctrine. In the words of Philip Schaff, “We must freely admit that not a few passages, especially in the Old Testament, favour a double decree to the extent of supreme supralapsarianism; yea, they go beyond the Calvinistic system and seem to make God himself the author of sin.”<sup>4</sup> Apparently because Schaff was an Arminian, he did not want to see the passages teaching “supreme supralapsarianism” as making God the author of sin. But clearly, God ‘hardens’ peoples’ hearts to the extent of physical destruction to achieve divine purpose (Exodus 4:21; 7:13; Isaiah 6:9, 10; 44:18).<sup>5</sup> Yahweh also erects obstacles to make people stumble and perish (Jer. 6: 21); and somehow, if there be evil in a city, Yahweh caused it (Amos 3:6). Some of these Old Testament passages are quoted with approval in the New Testament (Matthew 13:14, 15; John 12:40; Rom. 9:10-24; 11:8) while other New Testament passages, though not quoting the Old Testament, express similar thought about God (e.g. II Thess. 2:11. More so, there are some humans “whose condemnation was written about long ago” (Jude 4 comp. John 17:12).

What has been said above is on the negative aspect of the doctrine of election, the aspect that many find incompatible with the teachings of God as love. There is the positive aspect, the non-controversial one that God in sovereignty foreknown (I Peter 1:2) and/or “appointed” (Acts 13:48), elected/chose (Ephes. 1:4, 11), predestined (Ephes. 1:5) some to salvation.

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Christian Classic Ethereal Library CD-Rom (Version 4) Vol. III Ch. 14.

<sup>5</sup> The English version of the Bible being used in this paper is *The New International Version*, copyrighted 1985, by the Zondervan Corporation in Grand Rapids, USA.

The double aspects of the doctrine made classical theologians to refer to the doctrine as “double decree”. *How* this action of God was done and *when* are debates among theologians. If we take the Pauline “outline” of it on the surface value as written in Romans 8, then

those who God *foreknew* he also *predestined* to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the first born among many brothers. And those he predestinated he also *called*; those he called, he also *justified*, those he justified he also *glorified* (Rom. 8: 29, 30).

The “foreknowledge of God” here can be taken as passive or active. The supralapsarians or supreme Calvinists will take it to be active; hence, John Stott quotes John Murray with approval, “‘know’ ... is used in a sense practically synonymous with ‘love’ ... ‘whom he foreknew’ ... is therefore virtually equivalent to ‘whom he foreloved’”.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, when we are discussing the doctrine, “election” can refer to the “double decree of God” – election to salvation, and election to reprobation which leads to damnation. Both are sometimes referred to as “predestination”.<sup>7</sup> Humans are ultimately divided into these two groups, with the latter being in the majority. Both were “elected” to their “destiny from the *beginning*”, at least according to Calvinism. As will be seen below, the election to salvation is not the issue that brings God’s love into question; it is “election” or ‘predestination’ to damnation or reprobation that is making some to doubt the love of God.

According to John Calvin, the greatest expositor of this doctrine in Christian history, the purpose of election (including reprobation) is for God’s glory (and power) and to display the divine twin attributes of mercy and justice (Rom. 9:22, 23). In election (and salvation) God displays mercy (and love); in reprobation (and damnation) God displays justice. None of the two groups deserved to be saved because humanity in Adam has become totally depraved. In fact, the

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<sup>6</sup> John R.W. Stott, *The Message of the Romans* (Leicester, England: Inter-varsity Press, 1984), 249, quoting John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1968), Vol. I, p. 317.

<sup>7</sup> Hence, many writers usually use “Predestination” and “election” synonymously. Sometimes, however, a subtle distinction is made by using “Predestination” to cover election to salvation, and foreordination to damnation or reprobation, while “election” is used to refer only to the foreordination of the believers to salvation. This distinction will not be followed here, because our topic used the word “election” in its broader sense to refer to the situation of both the ‘elects’ and the damned.

election and reprobation was done “before the creation of the world” (Ephes. 1: 4) or “from eternity”.<sup>8</sup> It is a debate among Christian thinkers whether God simply had foreknowledge (without foreordination) of what each individual do and then predestinated then thus, or God’s foreknowledge includes foreordination. In the first instance, it means humans can cooperate or otherwise with the divine; in the second instance, God’s sovereignty is emphasized, and human will is depicted as powerless. In sum, according to Calvinism, God in sovereignty foreordained the elects to salvation. The elects were totally depraved like the reprobates. But because God *loves* them<sup>9</sup> (and they have nothing in them to curry God’s love – they are in no way better than the reprobates), God simply loves them and have *mercy* on them.

The decree, as already stated is “a twofold decree – a decree of *election* unto holiness and salvation, and a decree of *reprobation* unto death on account of sin and guilt.”<sup>10</sup> It is the latter aspect of the decree – the decree of reprobation – that prompts many to ask how God can be loving if the reprobates were decreed “unto death”. Does this act to the reprobate make God “unloving”?

## 2. God Loves

The doctrine that God loves can also not be doubted. In fact, one does not have to be a Christian to believe this. As many as believe that God exists usually accept that God also loves the creatures. But Christianity emphasizes God’s love more than any other religion. To show love to us, God not only gave us the greatest gift that can be given (the only Son – John 3:16), God is also asserted to be love:

God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we love God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (I John 4: 8b-10).

The Bible clearly indicates that the love of God is universal. This is indicated by indiscriminate pronouns such as “all”, “whoever”, “every” and “anyone”. “For I take no pleasure in the death of *anyone*,

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<sup>8</sup> *The Lambert Articles* (1595) Article I and *The Westminster Confession* (1647) Chapter III, Article 1.

<sup>9</sup> *The Westminster Confession* (1595) III no. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. VIII, Ch. 14.

declares the sovereign LORD. Repent and live!” (Ezek. 18:32); “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that *whoever* believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16); “Then Peter began to speak: I now realize how true it is that *God does not show favouritism*, but accepts men from *every* nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:34, 35); “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting *anyone* to perish, but *everyone* to come to repentance” (II Peter 3:9). Even at the heart of the passage (Rom. 8-11) that Calvinists like to quote in favour of God’s special or discriminate favour to the elect, Paul writes, “For God has bound *all* men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them *all*” (Rom. 11:32).

### 3. Election and God’s Love

The clear biblical teachings that we have presented above are known to both sides of the debate on whether the doctrine of election makes God unloving. But we have been unable to be as broadminded as the Bible to hold the two together. All attempts to reconcile the two together have always resulted in the theologian emphasizing one aspect at the expense of the other. This is an indication of our finiteness, and it should be remembered that Paul the Apostle, Augustine of Hippo and John Calvin, the three great theologians who made the doctrine of election a pillar of their theology, did not deny the love of God. All of them rather conclude that reconciling the doctrine of election with the love of God is a mystery and eludes our comprehension.

Arminians tend to emphasize the universality of God’s love and human freewill; while the Calvinists emphasize the sovereignty of God and total depravity of the human race. However, it is to the credit of some Calvinists that they recognise the contention of the Arminians and tried to solve it, even though unsuccessfully by softening the second decree (of reprobation) or even evade it altogether.<sup>11</sup> Calvin recognised these attempts and writes,

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<sup>11</sup> Schaff writes in Note 827 of *History* (Vol. VIII Ch. 14): “The scholastic Calvinists distinguished in reprobation a negative element, namely *praeteritio* or *indebitae gratiae negatio* and a positive element predammation, *praedamatio* or *debitae poenae destinatio* ... The *Westminster Confession* (Ch. III.7) uses the term “passes by”, which is equivalent to preterition or omission; *The Gallican Conf.* (Ch. XII) and the [Footnote continued on next page ... ]

Many professing a desire to defend the Deity from an invidious charge admit the doctrine of election, but deny that anyone is reprobated.... This they do ignorantly and childishly since there could be no election without its opposite reprobation.”<sup>12</sup>

If the Bible has not asserted the doctrine of election, human reasoning could have easily disposed of it. But the doctrine is hard to deny in the face of clear biblical teachings. This is because human reasoning will show God as unfair or unjust, if some were eternally and unconditionally chosen to be saved and others to be destroyed, all for the purpose of showing divine glory. Even if the reprobate (like the elect) deserved damnation, (and God is not obliged to save anyone), our finite reasoning indicates that since granting election/salvation to all will not diminish the divine (some even argue that, God should do it, even if it will – Jesus died to save the race), why not grant it to all? Therefore, by human reasoning, the doctrine makes God unloving; it makes the divine unfair.

However, on a second look and careful reasoning and if we want to accept biblical authority, God is neither unloving nor unfair. How this reasoning will work out is our next topic.

### **B. The Explanation**

Does the doctrine of election make God unloving? To arrive at an answer that is of sound reasoning and biblically based, care needs to be taken in analysing the conceptual issues involved. Many have rushed to answer which makes them to deny one aspect or the other of the doctrine and thus violate both reason and the authority of the Bible.

As already mentioned, Calvin gave a clearer expression to the doctrine than many. According to him, election or predestination

is the eternal and unchangeable decree of God by which he foreordained, for his own glory and the display of his attributes of mercy and justice, a part of the human race, without any merit of their own, to eternal salvation, and another part, in just punishment of their sin, to eternal damnation.<sup>13</sup>

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*Belgic Conf.* (Ch. XVI) use the milder term *laisser relinquerre*, to leave, namely in the natural state of condemnation and ruin.”

<sup>12</sup> John Calvin, *Institute of Christian Religion*, Christian Classic Ethereal Library CD-Rom Version 4, Book III, Ch. 23, Section 1.

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin as paraphrased in Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* Vol. III Ch. 14



Moreover, predestination or election “implies a twofold decree – a decree of *election* unto holiness and salvation, and a decree of *reprobation* unto death on account of sin and guilt.”<sup>14</sup>

The purpose of election then, is that God’s glory (and power) and mercy might be shown to the elects and to show divine glory (and power) and justice to the reprobates. To the first group, (the elect), God cannot be said to be unloving. After all they did not deserve to be elected. Like the reprobates, they were totally depraved. But God show *love* to them by having mercy on them. About this group then, the answer to our question will be “No!”. In fact to this group, it is the doctrine of election that reveals God’s love.

It is on the other side of the fence that our question is more pertaining. Like the elect, the reprobates were also totally depraved. But unlike the elect, God did not have mercy on them. Their reprobation is “unto death on account of sin and guilt”. Again, we should remember God’s purpose for this: to show divine glory (and power) and justice. Since God did not have mercy on them, can we say the doctrine of election makes God unloving to this group? Even here, we have to be careful, for love can be displayed in justice. In spite of the paradoxical manner in which he expressed it, Calvin’s statement on this is true: “In a marvellous and divine way, he loved us even when he hated us.”<sup>15</sup> Perhaps this is his own way of expressing the same sentiment expressed by Plato in *The Republics* about “loving justice”.

The question whether the doctrine of election makes God unloving is thus resolved into whether God can love and be just at the same time. This is not an easy problem to resolve either, however, and theologians have recognised the difficulty of reconciling God’s love with justice. Hence, to take account of the facts that God’s love does not imply injustice, and neither does divine justice make God unloving, P.T. Forsyth has coined and popularized the concept of God’s ‘holy love’.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Paul Tillich sees love as the uniting

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<sup>14</sup> Philip Schaff, *History*.

<sup>15</sup> John Calvin, *Institute of the Christian Religion* Book II, xvi 4. Cf. xviii.

<sup>16</sup> P.T. Forsyth, as cited in John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, (Leicester, England: Inter-varsity Press, 1986), 131. P.T. Forsyth wrote of God’s ‘holy love’ in *Cruciality of the Cross* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909), *The Work of Christ* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910) and *The Justification of God* (London: Duckworth, 1916).



principle of justice and power. In other words, the divine attributes of power and justice are united by God's love.<sup>17</sup> In the same vein, Daniel Day Williams confirms that "Profound moralists see that love must be concerned with justice."<sup>18</sup>

John Stott did not shrink from using human experience to understand how God's love and justice can strive together. Although he agrees with P.T. Forsyth that this picture is anthropomorphic, to him, anthropomorphism is biblical. Hence, he sees the example of how love and justice strive together in God in Hosea 11: 8-9,

How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, Israel?  
How can I treat you like Admah?  
How can I make you like Zeboiim?  
My heart is changed within me,  
all my compassion is aroused.  
I will not carry out my fierce anger  
nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim  
For I am God, and not man –  
the Holy One among you.  
I will not come in wrath.

Stott then comments on the above passage thus:

Here surely is a conflict of emotions, a strife of attributes [of justice and love], within God. The four questions beginning with 'how can I ...' bear witness to a struggle between what Yahweh *ought* to do because of his righteousness [justice] and what he *cannot* do because of his love. And what is the 'change of heart' within him but an inner tension between his 'compassion' and his 'fierce anger'.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, the biblical writers do not hesitate in ascribing both attributes to God at the same time. The two are juxtaposed in several passages. An example is Psalm 89: 14, "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you."<sup>20</sup>

Most importantly, it is the cross of Christ that reveals God's love and justice supremely in the same event. Thus, Emil Brunner writes,

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Tillich, *Theology of Peace* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 94.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Day Williams, *The Spirit and Forms of Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), Chap. 12, also available at [www.Religion-Online.org/showchapter.asp?title=2080&c=1980](http://www.Religion-Online.org/showchapter.asp?title=2080&c=1980).

<sup>19</sup> John R.W Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 130. The italics are Stott's.

<sup>20</sup> Other examples include Exod. 34: 6-7; Psalm 85: 10; Isa. 45: 21; Hab. 3: 2; Micah 7: 18; John 1: 14; Rom. 3: 26; 11: 22; Ephes. 2: 3-4; I John 1: 9.

“The cross is the only place where the loving, forgiving, merciful God is revealed in such a way that we perceive his holiness and his love are generally infinite.”<sup>21</sup> And G.C. Berkouwer agrees, “In the cross of Christ, God’s justice and love are *simultaneously* revealed.”<sup>22</sup>

How are we to relate these to the question whether God still loves even in being just to the reprobate? This is not clear from all that has been said. However, it has been demonstrated that God’s justice and love are not contradictory and so cannot be impugned. Therefore, as God’s love to the elect cannot be denied, so also God’s love even to the reprobate cannot be denied. This is because, even in judgement, God loves.

### Conclusion

After all these explanations, have we been able to give a clear and explicit answer to our question? Yes, our answer has been that the doctrine of election does not make God unloving. It has been shown that the doctrine of election is biblical. Similarly, the basic Christian tenet that God loves the creatures is also biblical. In many attempts to reconcile election and the love of God, usually it is the former (election) that suffers. However, the Calvinists also usually soften the universal extent of God’s love, to the extent of being patient, “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (II Peter 3: 9b).

In the brief analysis of this problem that we have done, we have clarified that the election of the saints rather demonstrates the love of God to them, rather than showing God as unloving. However, the foreordination of the reprobate to damnation is what apparently questions God’s justice or fairness. This, we claim, does not demonstrate that God is unloving, even to the reprobate, for the love of God can, and is shown in justice. In fact, the Christian claim is that these two attributes of God –love and justice – are supremely revealed in the death of God’s Son for us on the cross.

Furthermore, it should be clear that it is if the destiny of the reprobate is considered in relation to the destiny of the elects that the question of God’s love is raised. If the destiny of the reprobate is

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<sup>21</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Mediator: A Study of the Central Doctrine of the Christian Faith* Trans. Olive Wyon(London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), 470.

<sup>22</sup> G.C. Berkouwer, *Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965), 277.

considered in isolation, it will be agreed that, God is simply just, and we may not raise any question about whether he loves.

Finally, all the great Christian thinkers who have defended the doctrine of election have said that it is only for the matured in faith. It is neither for the unbeliever nor even for the ‘babies’ in faith.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the doctrine is given not for speculation but for practical purposes – to boost the Christian life of the elect, to make them humble. This is well articulated by Philip Schaff:

The motive and aim of this doctrine was not speculative but practical. It served as a bulwark of free grace, an antidote to Pelagianism and human pride, a stimulus to humility and gratitude, a sense of comfort and peace in trial and despondency.... He who believes in Christ as his Lord and Saviour may have a reasonable assurance of being among the elect, and this faith will constrain him to follow Christ and to persevere to the end lest he be cast away. Those who believe in the perseverance of faith are likely to practice it. Present unbelief is no sure sign of reprobation as long as the way is open for repentance and conversion.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Calvin omitted the doctrine of predestination in his own Catechism.

<sup>24</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* Vol. VIII, Ch. XIV.