

## Sovereign Election and Predestination

### Introduction

In order to interpret the Bible correctly it is important to apply an important principle of Bible exposition: Scripture must be allowed to interpret Scripture. When confronted by an obscure verse difficult to understand, one must start off by consulting other scriptures pertaining to the same topic that are easy to understand. Usually the clearer verses will help to throw more light on those that are difficult to understand. When it seems that certain scriptures contradict each other, the fault usually lies with our flawed understanding or by using a poor translation of the Bible.

### Predestination – Definition according to the Westminster Confession of Faith

The Westminster Confession of Faith is a Reformed confession of faith that has been adopted by various churches around the world and is used as their standard of doctrine.

#### The following are quotations from it:

*“By the decree of God...some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and **others fore-ordained to everlasting death**” (Chapter III, Of God’s Eternal Decree, iii, my emphasis).*

*“These angels and men thus predestinated, and fore-ordained, **are particularly and unchangeably designed**, and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished” (Chapter III, Of God’s Eternal Decree, iv, my emphasis).*

*“The rest of mankind **God was pleased...for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath, for their sin...**” (Chapter III, Of God’s Eternal Decree, vii, my emphasis).*

#### Quotations from the confessions of faith of Afrikaans Reformed churches to illustrate what they believe about Predestination and Divine Election

*“Dat God **aan sommige mense...die gawe van die geloof skenk en aan ander dit nie skenk nie**, volg uit sy ewige besluit...Volgens hierdie besluit maak God die harte van die uitverkorenes genadiglik ontvanklik – **hoe verhard hierdie harte ook al mag wees – en buig hulle tot geloof**” (Dordtse Leerreëls, no.6, from the *Psalms en Skrifberymings* used by the N.G.Kerk, Gereformeerde Churches and N.H. Church in South Africa, my emphasis).*

#### English translation

*“According to His eternal decision God grants saving faith to some and not to others...according to this decision He softens the hearts of those He elected...and **bends them to believe...how hard they might have been**” (Dordtse Leerreëls, no.6, from *Psalms en Skrifberymings* used by the Dutch Reformed Church, the Reformed Churches and the N.H. Church in South Africa, my emphasis).*

*“God is barmhartig, aangesien Hy dié wat Hy uitverkies het, uit hierdie verderf trek en verlos; ...God is regverdig deurdat **Hy die ander in hulle val en verderf laat bly** waarin hulle hulleself gewerp het”* (Nederlandse Geloofsbelydenis, Artikel 16, from *Psalms en Skrifberymings* used by the N.G.Kerk, the Gereformeerde Kerk and the N.H.Kerk in Suid – Afrika, my emphasis).

### **English translation**

*“God is merciful in that He saves from eternal condemnation those that He has elected and leaves the others in their state of condemnation in which they have casted themselves”* (Nederlandse Geloofsbelydenis, Article 16, from *Psalms en Skrifberymings* used by N.G.Church, Gereformeerde Church and N.H.Church in South – Africa).

It is hard to accept that, according to this confession, some believe that whilst God has the power to bend (“buig”) hardened hearts to believe, He allows others to go to hell!

### **Scripture does not teach that only a selected group is predestined to be saved**

#### **God calls all people to repent to be saved**

##### **1 Timothy 2:4:**

*“For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who will have **all men** to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”* (My emphasis).

##### **2 Peter 3:9:**

*“The Lord is not slow concerning His promise, as some count slowness, but is long-suffering toward us, **not purposing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance**”* (My emphasis).

##### **Acts 10:34-35**

*“Then Peter began to speak: “Now I understand that God shows no partiality. Indeed, **whoever** fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him in any nation”* (My emphasis).

Although the Word declares that God desires that everybody should be saved, all are not prepared to repent. Jesus, as Saviour, extends an open invitation to all people:

*“Come to Me **all** you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”*  
(**Matt. 11:28**, my emphasis).

To believe that the “all” in this invitation is applicable to only an exclusive, selected group of people, as it is proclaimed by the Predestination doctrine, is to play with the meaning of words and accuse Jesus of not meaning what He said.

##### **Romans 9, Acts 13:48**

**Romans 9** and **Acts 13:48** are proof texts usually used to “prove” that God sovereignly chooses to save some people and condemn others to hell. In the light of the clear meaning of passages like **1 Timothy 2:3-4** and **2 Peter 3:9** that clearly declare that it is God’s will that all people should be saved, there must be an explanation for the seemingly contradiction. Calvinists read their own preconceived ideas into **Romans 9** without considering what is revealed in the wider context of Scripture.

### The context of Romans 9

*“For I myself was wishing to be accursed from Christ for my brothers, **my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites...**” (Rom. 9:3-4, my emphasis).*

In this passage Paul defines the subject of his discussion as his *“**kinsmen according to the flesh,**”* the **Israelites** – Paul is talking about a nation, not individuals! Scripture must explain itself:

### Romans 9:11-13

*“...for the children had not yet been born, neither had done any good or evil; but that the purpose of God **according to election** might stand... The elder shall serve the younger. **As it is written,** “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated” (My emphasis).*

It is important to consider the context of what was written about Jacob and Esau. In **Genesis 25:23-26** it is written:

*“And Jehovah said to her, **Two nations are in your womb, and two kinds of people shall be separated** from your bowels... the older shall serve the younger. And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, twins were in her womb! And the first came out red, all over like a hairy garment. And they called his name Esau. And after that his brother came out...And his name was called Jacob.” (My emphasis).*

In Paul’s discussion of Rebekah’s two sons, Jacob and Esau in **Romans 9**, he uses the word “election.” Although Esau was the oldest, God chose Jacob as the one through whose descendants the Messiah would be born. Take note, God did not elect Jacob, the man, unto salvation; He chose him and his descendants, the nation Israel, as the instrument through which the Messiah would be born. Nothing is said about God choosing to save individuals of Israel. Neither is it declared that through election, Esau and all his descendants were eternally condemned to hell. It only declares that God chose that the Messiah should be born as a descendant of Jacob and not as a descendent of Esau.

### Romans 9:13

*“**As it is written,** “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated” (My emphasis).*

Those who believe in the Predestination Doctrine place much emphasis on this scripture that Paul quotes from the Old Testament. In order to understand what it means, one must look at the context of *“**as it is written**”* in Malachi:

*“..I hated Esau and made his mountains a desolation...**They** shall build, but I will throw down; and they shall call them the region of wickedness, and **the people** with*

*whom Jehovah is indignant forever...they shall call them... **the people** with whom Jehovah is indignant forever. ” (Mal. 1:1-5, my emphasis).*

Again, it is the outcome of the two nations, Israel and Edom that is discussed in this passage, not the salvation of two individuals. At the time of Malachi’s pronouncement, the two patriarchs, Jacob and Esau had already passed away. When the Word says that God hated Esau (the nation), we must keep in mind that Jesus also said that “hating” one’s family is a requirement for being a disciple (**Luk. 14:26**). If Jesus stated that one had to love your enemies (**Matt. 5:44**), surely “hating” your family could not have been meant literally. This “hate” that Jesus is speaking about, must rather be seen in a comparative light. Comparatively speaking God did not bless the descendants of Esau in the same manner as Israel. It is true that God punished the Edomites by making their land a wilderness (**Mal. 1:3**), but did He do it without a reason? To put God’s action into perspective, it is important to look at Esau’s history as recorded in **Genesis 25:23-26**:

*“And Jehovah heard him, and Rebekah his wife conceived...And Jehovah said to her, **Two nations** are in your womb, and two kinds of people shall be separated from your bowels. And the one people shall be stronger than the other people, **the older shall serve the younger**” (Gen. 25:23-26, my emphasis).*

The prophecy that the oldest would serve the youngest referred to the nations of Israel and Edom. Nowhere in Scripture is it stated that Esau, as an individual, ever served his brother, Jacob. The Bible explains why Edom was destroyed:

*“Shame shall cover you from the **violence against your brother Jacob**, and you shall be cut off forever...on the day that the strangers were capturing his force, and foreigners entered his gates...**you were like one of them**” (Obad. 1:15).*

Edom reaped what they had sown (**Gal. 6:7**). The descendants of Esau were punished for their sin. Peter explains:

*“Truly I see that God is no respecter of persons; but in every nation he who fears Him and works righteousness is accepted with Him” (Acts 10:34-35).*

#### **Acts 13:48**

*“And hearing, the nations rejoiced and glorified the Word of the Lord. And as many as were ordained to eternal life, believed” (MKJV).*

#### **The meaning of “tetagmenoiō (tasso) – (“ordained”) in Acts 13:48**

In spite of so many other scriptures that declare the opposite, many believe that based on their interpretation of **Acts 13:48**, the word “ordained” proves the fact of unconditional election. They do not, however, take into account the fact that Greek scholars differ in their understanding of this word. If the meaning of the word is brought into harmony with other scriptures that clearly refer to the free will of man, one comes to a clearer understanding of its meaning. The interpretation that **Acts 13:48** refers to a group that were irresistibly elected, is not compatible with scriptures that declare, in the clearest terms, that God desires all to be saved. They that believe in irresistible election have, for example, no

explanation for Christ's exhortation to "strive to enter in at the strait gate" (**Luke 13:24**) or for the prodigal son deciding "I will arise and go to my father" (**Luke 15:18**). No argument can be brought in against the fact that Scripture also attributes faith to individuals (**Matt. 9:22; 15:28; Mark 10:52; Luke 7:50; 17:18**, etc.)

*The Greek New Testament of Alford* explains the word **tetagemnoiō (tasso)** – ordained, as "marshalled themselves, prepared themselves, or disposed themselves" (Alford, *The Greek New Testament*, II:153). This explanation fits in with what happened in the context of Acts 13 and what is also stated in other parts of Scripture. So for instance the people in Berea were described as being "more open-minded than the people in Thessalonica. They listened to the message with great eagerness, and every day they studied the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was really true. Many of them believed" (**Acts 17:11-12**).

Admittedly, **Acts 13:48**, when read with a preconceived idea of what it means, does seem to support the doctrine of Predestination. However, in the context we read how Paul pleaded with the Jews in Antioch to accept Jesus as Saviour, but they refused (Why plead with people to be saved if you believe only some will be saved by an irresistible choice of God?). The context of **Acts 13:48** shows that the people had a whole week in which to consider Paul and Barnabas' words. Their conversion was not a result of passively being coerced to believe; it was only when they heard Paul and Barnabas again after they had had a week in which to reflect, that they came to believe (**Acts 13:44-48**).

Although the Holy Spirit wants to influence all people to be saved, His work is resisted by many. So for example Jesus said to Paul at his conversion:

*"And the Lord said, "I am Jesus, Whom you are persecuting. It is **hard for you to kick against the pricks**" (**Acts 9:5**, LITV, my emphasis).*

This verse confirms the fact that the work of the Holy Spirit is not irresistible, but that one can "kick against the pricks."

### **The Potter and the Clay**

*"O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter? says Jehovah. Behold, As the clay in the potter's hands, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel. The instant I shall speak concerning a nation...to pluck it up and to pull it down...if that nation, against whom I have spoken, will turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do to them..." (**Jer. 18:1-10**, my emphasis).*

Just like in **Romans 9**, the prophetic word from Jeremiah was applicable to the nation of Israel. Nowhere in the context do we read that God arbitrarily predestined any individual to be saved or to be condemned.

### **There is a difference between God's foreknowledge (knowing beforehand) and predestination (foreordination)**

Because God created time, He exists outside of it and He can therefore see your birth and death at the same time. It does not, however, imply that He violates or manipulates your will by "bending" it to do His bidding. He allows all people the freedom to make their own choices and because He has foreknowledge, He knows the outcome of everything beforehand.

## Pharaoh's case

"I will harden Pharaoh's heart and multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt. But Pharaoh shall not listen to you, and I will lay My hand upon Egypt...by great judgments" (**Exodus 7:3-4**).

At first glance it seems as if God was the initiator of Pharaoh's hardness of heart, but **Exodus 3:19** proves otherwise. In this verse we see that God had foreknowledge about Pharaoh:

*"I know that the king of Egypt won't allow you to go unless compelled to do so by force..."* (My emphasis).

God did not initiate the hardness of Pharaoh's heart; He responded to what was already in it. God repeatedly, through the recurring plagues, provided Pharaoh with an opportunity to change his mind, but every time he refused! (**Ex. 7:14-16, 8:15, 19, Ex. 9:27...!**).

*"Yet Pharaoh's heart was stubborn and he did not listen to them, just as the LORD had said would happen. He has refused to let the people go"* (**Ex. 7:13-14**).

The Word warns about the danger of repeatedly hardening one's heart against Godly truth. A time comes when God hands such people over to their own desires:

*"...because they did not receive the love of the truth...And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie, so that all those who do not believe the truth, but delight in unrighteousness, might be condemned"* (**2 Thess. 2:10-12**).

Paul reiterates the same truth:

*"God's anger is revealed from heaven against all the sin and evil of the people whose evil ways prevent the truth from being known...And so God has given those people over to do the filthy things their hearts desire, and they do shameful things with each other..."* (**Rom. 1:18-27**).

## There is a difference between being an instrument and being a disciple

Being chosen by God as an instrument says nothing about its moral condition or anything about its eternal destination. Discipleship, on the other hand, implies being saved and committing oneself to following Jesus.

## Examples of instruments chosen to be used by God

A donkey (**Num. 22:21-34**), a big fish (**Jonah 1:17**), Assyria – *"The LORD said, "Assyria! I use Assyria like a club to punish those with whom I am angry"* (**Is. 10:5-6**), etc.

## Conclusion

Examples of people that had to choose to obey God (Adam and Eve, **Gen. 2:16**; *"I am now giving you the choice between life and death..."* **Deut. 30:19**; *"...decide today whom you will serve..."* **Joshua 24:15**; *"...how often would I have gathered your children together, even as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and **you would not!**"* **Matt. 23:37**, my emphasis.

The use of the word "election" in the New Testament must be understood in the context of being chosen *"in Christ"* (**Eph 1:4**). God chooses His Son, and He, Jesus, extends an open invitation: *"Come to Me all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"* (**Matt. 11:28**).

What must we think of people who say that God loves all people, but believe that whilst He has the irresistible power to sovereignly save some to go to heaven, He leaves others to be eternally condemned? No wonder the book in which Dave Hunt rejects Predestination and Sovereign Election, is called *What kind of love is this?*

The fact that there are true reborn believers in churches who hold to the doctrine of sovereign election, is not as result of them believing what their rigid confessions state, but is as result of them being persuaded by what they have read in the Bible for themselves and by the influence of evangelical literature.

According to the Gospel, all people can be assured that God loves them, that Christ died for their sins and "whosoever will" can be saved by repenting and accepting Jesus as Saviour!

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