

Transcript 189

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. Joining me today is Jeff, the administrator of bibleref.com, and Kevin, the managing editor of Got Questions Ministries. I'm Shea Houdmann, the CEO and founder of Got Questions Ministries. So we're continuing today our series on Calvinism. We did a first episode, kind of a summary of Calvinism in general. Episode 2 in the series was what is total depravity. Next, today we're jumping to the next point in the five points of Calvinism. What is unconditional election?

Shea Houdmann

Anytime someone throws out the word election or predestination, this is one where there's some pretty hostile reactions. As most people, when they think of election, it's that God chooses everything. There's no such thing as free will or human responsibility. Therefore, what's the point of anything? That's actually not what the Bible teaches about election. But the doctrine of unconditional election, according to Calvinism, is that God, based on his own sovereignty, chose of who would be saved, elected certain individuals to salvation. The opposite conditional election, which is held by in varying various forms by Armenians and other Christians, is that God elected, predestined, chose people to be saved based on his foreknowledge of who would believe. So God, knowing the future, sees who will believe, and then elects those individuals to salvation. So those are the two choices here. Unconditional election, God chose based on his own sovereign will. Conditional election, God chose based on his foreknowledge of who would believe. And again there this is oversimplifying it to an extent there's variations in the spectrum there. But what you won't hear on this, it is unbiblical to deny election. It is unbiblical to deny that God predestines because there are numerous scriptures that clearly teach that God predestines some to salvation. So the debate, biblically speaking, should not be whether God elects. Whether God predestines. Whether God chooses. The debate should be, how he chooses, on what basis he chooses, and how does that actually impact us in terms of our responsibility to believe? So jumping into the conversation here, Kevin, why don't you start us off with what are some of the key biblical texts on election and predestination?

Kevin Stone

Yes, there are several that that we would look at that to actually teach very clearly predestination and election. Using the word choose to elect is to choose. And so God chooses some to be saved. And one of the main go to passages is Ephesians chapter one, verse four of that chapter says that even as he chose us in him, that is God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him in love. Verse nine, that same chapter says making known to us the mystery of his will according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ. And verse 11 in him we have obtained an inheritance having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will. And so Ephesians chapter one seems to be pretty clear, which uses the word chose which, or elected and uses the word predestined. And I was talking with someone not too long ago. That said, I don't, I just don't, I don't buy this whole thing of predestination. And I said, well, it's actually a biblical term. And I pointed to Ephesians one and say, you know, it's yeah however we're going to deal with it it's the word is there, predestined and then elected. But in this passage we see that God shows us in Christ. And this happened before the foundation of the world. Before the creation

even. And that we have been predestined according to the purpose of God. According to his purpose who works everything according to the council of his will. So it sure seems like God is in charge. He's the sovereign and he is the one who chose us in Christ. And this choosing happened a long time ago.

Kevin Stone

Another passage would be Romans 8 and verse 30, this golden chain of salvation sometimes its called. It says that those whom God predestined, he also called. Those whom he called, he also justified. And those whom he justified, he also glorified. So predestination, the calling, which would be the election, justification and glorification. And according to this verse Romans 8 verse 30, everyone who is predestined will be glorified. I mean that that chain is unbroken here in this verse.

Kevin Stone

And then I'll share one more, Second Timothy one in verse 9. Praises the one who saved us and called us to a holy calling. Not because of our works, but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began. And so again, we have God's choosing or his election, here it's called his calling. He called us not because of anything that we did, not our works, but because of his own purpose. His will. His grace is mentioned here. And he gave us this grace. He had planned to do this before the ages began. So again, we're looking back before the foundation of the world again. So these three passages and then there are others that very clearly teach God's election, God's calling to salvation.

Jeff Laird

The other thing you see in this is there's a bit of logic that kind of comes behind it. I mean, if God is truly omniscient, omnipotent, timeless, all knowing, there's a sense of saying how could he not unconditionally elect? He's going to make choices. He knows what those choices are going to mean. So you there's really no way to get around the idea that God in some sense at least, is making decisions that don't come with any human input or any human influence. So the the unconditional election is another one of these where we're trying to use human terms and human thoughts to understand the mind of God. We're trying to look behind the curtain and say what's the process? What's the logical steps? What's the meaning behind this? And there's there's good and bad ways that we can approach that. And just the terminology that we use. So for example, unconditional election, you know when we mean that in the sense that the Bible strongly supports, which is that we cannot earn our salvation, there's no sense in which God is going to sit back and just watch us and wait and say, oh, OK, that works. You know you've done enough. That's that's a good thing. That doesn't work at all, you know, so there's no condition in that sense. But at the same time, God clearly has decided that only those who accept salvation are going to be saved. That's sort of a condition. Now, we don't influence that because we also believe that he's the one who calls us to the faith that we have. So there's this sort of circular thing where you're running between 2 extremes on on which end is which.

Jeff Laird

There are some concerns about the unconditional election when we don't take it exactly the right way. We've talked sometimes about things like what we call Hyper Calvinism, which is the idea that and again, a lot of these these doctrines flow together and work together. That's the idea that if God is going to unconditionally elect, He knows and he's already picked the people who are going to be saved. Then

why would we evangelize? Why would we talk to people? And first of all, we know that God's commanded us to make disciples and to spread the gospel. So we have that. But we also have the fact that in the gospels we have other statements that are made that indicate that in some way, God still holds us accountable, still holds us responsible, still employs some aspect of our will in the way all this works.

Jeff Laird

There's a famous example of Matthew where Jesus, Jesus makes a comment about a different group in a different area. Says, you know, if this same message had been mentioned there, they would have repented. He brings up Stephen. Stephen brings this up in Acts where he talks to the Jewish people. And he says you're stubborn. You resist the Holy Spirit. So we can tell that there's there's not a sense in which God just whenever he wants something, he automatically overrides everything about our will. He does let us make choices. The question is to what extent does he allow that to be part of the process? And like you were saying, Shea, there are different ways to look at that. One way is to say that absolutely nothing about humanity has any influence. There's good and bad things behind that. One of the bad things behind that is what we called double predestination, which is the suggestion that God deliberately created some persons with the explicit intention that those persons would go to hell. That's not necessarily impossible. We have Romans 9, for example that basically says, look, God is God. He can do whatever he wants. If he wants to make people specifically for that purpose, He's perfectly allowed to do that. But then we also have the passages talk about how God does not want people to perish, that he doesn't hold people accountable for the things that they cannot control. So there's there's stuff to see on both sides of it. And what we see from what Kevin was saying is that there is this clear sense that God is electing. We know that nothing we do is going to overcome that. So there is unconditional election without question in what Scripture says. The real trick is to understand or say how do we actually apply that? What does that mean? How do we use that idea?

Shea Houdmann

Definitely Jeff, and you're hitting some of the practical points. And we're going to cover the practical points like kind of in episode seven of the series where that's where the rubber hits the road on a lot of these things. It's like, OK, there's this can be a fun, enjoyable, deep theological conversation, but how does it actually impact us personally and how we live our lives, how we operate, how we evangelize, how we share our faith? And there definitely are implications. I mean you can if someone is fully applying Calvinism, fully applying Arminianism, you can tell a difference in how they share the gospel. But with that said, ultimately the practical things do not override specifically what the Bible teaches. And as Kevin was talking about in in Romans 8, in the in Ephesians 1, the Bible explicitly teaches predestination. So we have to deal with what the Bible teaches. And it's it's it's it's fun looking behind the curtain like you said, Jeff, trying to figure out these things. But there comes a time where in a sense we have to embrace the mystery, so to speak, and that trust that while I don't understand everything about God, how he operates, I'm going to trust him. And this is one of those things where one of the biggest questions in all of theology and one of the most frequent questions that we get at Got Questions about anything related to Calvinism is how can God be sovereign in electing some to salvation and us actually be responsible for our decision to receive Christ if the Bible teaches both? So it's it's a challenge. It's a struggle. I mean, I. Got Questions we do not have an answer for this in the sense of we don't have a perfect explanation for it, but getting to a point where you can embrace the mystery and say I don't

understand how these things work together, but I'm going to trust the God that does. And that's kind of the attitude that, after trust me, many, many years of me personally struggling with this trying to figure it out, had to come to, you know what? I'm going to choose to, to believe the Bible teaches both of these are true, and while that doesn't make sense in my brain, I'm going to trust that it does in God's. And that was a very exhale moment. It's like I can let this go. And so you see, wow on Got Questions, while we definitely lean more towards Calvinism than we do Arminianism, including on this issue. We don't feel the need to fight about this or argue about this, and many of the points, many of the intricacies of it, instead of just, you know, what God calls us to proclaim the gospel, God calls us to trust him and recognize his sovereignty over everything. How's it work together? I don't know, but I'm going to choose to, to live in what the Bible teaches rather than living based on whether I can perfectly figure it out and explain it to others.

Kevin Stone

Yeah. One of the things that I really like about the doctrine of unconditional election is that it lets God be God. One of the themes of scriptures is that salvation belongs to the Lord. So the doctrine of unconditional election definitely places the ball in God's court. You know the salvation belongs to him. He chooses who is saved. At the same time there has got to be some type of of grace that God extends to humanity that is either received or rejected. And Jesus speaks of common grace. He doesn't call it by that term, but Jesus talked about how God sends the rain on the just and the unjust. And so you know, everybody gets what they need. They get rain or sunshine or whatever it is. But God is, God does not show favoritism. He's no respecter of persons. So there's a sense in which humanity receives common grace. And if that grace is received with gratitude, and Thanksgiving, and worship of the of the one who gives that grace then that may be, you know, leading to more grace. But then there are those who reject that grace, who do not acknowledge God as for who he is. They don't acknowledge him as the creator, and so they are rejecting common grace. Does that lead to, you know, not receiving further grace? There's got to be a way to to talk about receiving versus rejecting grace. Scripture is full of calls to people to actually receive the message. You know, we are commanded to repent. We're commanded to believe. How does that fit with unconditional election? Like you, Shea, I say I'm not sure, but I believe both to be true. And so I I can live with that tension in my life.

Shea Houdmann

Living with the tension, I love how you said that Kevin. And that's some very apt way to describe coming to grips with, you know, I'm not smart enough to figure this out or at Got Questions we'll get people who are like, I finally did it. I found out the perfect explanation of the sovereignty of God versus human responsibility. But it's not Calvinism or Arminianism. And then they explain it to me and it's like, that's Arminianism really, or that's Calvinism. Like no, no, it's not like, yes, really it is. But it's just living with the tension rather than investing all of your life, all of your theological muscle, all of your brain power, and I've got to figure this out. It's like, no, you you don't have to. And we're not going this side of eternity.

Shea Houdmann

Kevin, so earlier you read from Romans 8. And I know one of the big things about this is the difference between unconditional election and conditional election. And Romans 8 starts with, for those he foreknew. So many of our Armenian brothers and sisters in Christ, will take this and some other passages in the New Testament to talk about foreknowledge and use it. See what it's saying here is that

God predestined based on his foreknowledge, his knowledge before of who would believe. Now the Bible definitely does link foreknowledge with predestination, but doesn't actually ever say foreknowledge of what. So Kevin, why do you think the foreknowledge in Romans 8:28 and other passages are not referring specifically to God's knowledge beforehand of who will believe?

Kevin Stone

I'll go ahead and give you the the Calvinist answer for this. This is what the Calvinist would say about the foreknowledge of God, that it it cannot refer to just simply looking forward in in time and seeing that this person will receive Jesus, therefore, I'm going to choose him. The Calvinist would say that cannot be because of what else Scripture says elsewhere that no one seeks God. In Romans chapter three. That the natural man cannot understand spiritual things, First Corinthians two. That a person who's not in Christ is a slave of sin, Roman six. Our hearts are desperately wicked and they're deceitful, Jeremiah 17. And that all of our righteous deeds are simply filthy rags before God, Isaiah 64. And so the Calvinist would say, you know if God did that, if God looked forward in time and saw just the people who were going to believe, God would actually see nobody. Because left to our own devices, we would never turn to Christ. We have to have God intervening in our lives in some way. So that would be the Calvinist response to the idea that foreknowledge is simply God seeing who who was going to believe and and who wasn't. The crux of the debate really comes down to does God elect people because they believe in Jesus? Or does God elect people so that they will believe in Jesus? And that's what it comes down to, the debate between Arminianism and Calvinism.

Jeff Laird

And those are important parts to to separate into parse carefully. And this is one of those places where precision starts to make a big difference in how we look at this. Shea you brought up the idea of something like mystery, for example. And I think that that's healthy. I think there's times where we need to look at something and go, we've we've moved beyond the veil of human understanding. So, like from a scientific perspective, what's on the other side of the the event horizon of a black hole? That's the place where all of the matter and energy finally gets to a point where nothing can come back out after that. We don't know what's going on past that. That's not me copying out. I'm just saying that I'm willing to accept the fact that I don't know because I cannot know what's happening there. You know everything before that. If something doesn't seem right, if something doesn't seem like it works, then I need to kind of think about it. And with issues like this, that's where I think sometimes we need to be careful Calvinism and Arminianism sometimes have a tendency to use the word mystery like an escape lever or an ejection box where they get caught in something contradictory in the way they are approaching that particular issue. And you say yeah, but how how can it be this and this totally opposite thing the way you're putting it? And the answer is, well, it's a mystery. It's not a mystery, that's a contradiction, you know. But when we look at something and we say I don't understand exactly what it is that makes God choose certain people and not other people, it's a mystery. Well, that is a mystery. That's moving outside of human experience and now we're into the nature of God and who he is.

Jeff Laird

The other thing we can look at is that with unconditional election, I don't think we necessarily have to say that free will or our choice has to be something that is a distinction or a contradiction to that because they're again part of the discussion is how does God choose to use that? God certainly can't

look forward and say I'm going to choose to save that person because they decided to choose me. But that doesn't mean that God can't say I'm going to choose that person and part of what I'm going to use to effectively bring them to faith is their free will. How exactly does that work? Well, that's complicated. But we see things in Scripture to talk about don't resist the Holy Spirit. You. This is the day of salvation. You know, all these other things. So I think that we're we're looking at this sort of traffic lane concept where instead of us give God giving us a straight line down the middle, he gives us these two boundaries of the lane. And he says you can't go this far and you can't go this far. Somewhere in there God is totally sovereign. He gets all the credit for salvation. He is entirely responsible. He is the one who decides who is and is not going to be saved. And at exactly the same time, I am entirely responsible for my sin, and I am entirely responsible for whether or not I respond to the gospel or not. Exactly how that works, I I don't know. But I know that I cannot really deny either one of those without pointing at Scripture and saying no. I don't believe that. I don't believe what it says.

Kevin Stone

Could I just mention one thing here that kind of like a third option that sometimes comes into the discussion? And that is corporate election. And and this particular theory says that God chose Jesus. That he did not elect individuals to be saved, but he did elect Christ. Jesus is the chosen one, which is what Christ means. The chosen one of God. And so in choosing his son, Christ, he's also perforce, choosing everyone who is spiritually linked to him. Everyone who has that spiritual union with him, everyone who is in Christ is therefore also chosen. And so this particular theory says that God particularly chose his son Jesus. And that people then exercise their free will to have faith in Jesus. At which point they are born again and they become part of the elect because Jesus is the elect. And I just throw that out as an honorable mention here because it is another theory that's out there.

Jeff Laird

And even with that, we still have this boundary line where there's there's this hard edge in scripture where we we cannot look at salvation and have any information that's coming from us to God, that is making the decision or that is making the determination. There's there's no sense in which we can say God is waiting for or looking for what we're doing to decide. That's different from saying God is looking at what we're doing, knowing what we're going to do, and changing or making decisions because he knows what we're going to do. That's subtly different, but it's important different. So anytime we say that the information is coming from us to God, the God is somehow sitting back and waiting, or he's letting us decide and he's just acting. That is entirely unbiblical, and that's where unconditional election really has strong roots.

Shea Houdmann

Well, you're you're exactly right, Jeff. And and none of this can we at Got Questions say that God is dependent on us. Or that anything that we do or decide overrides what God has willed, what God has chosen. And Kevin, like in with the corporate election, I think Ephesians, I think it's 1:5 that says God chose us in him, referring to Christ. That's kind of the key verse. And I I I have a couple of friends who are firmly believe that that is the solution. I mean like it it fits with like in Ephesians 1:5, but it doesn't really fit elsewhere. So again, corporate election, very interesting concept, but I don't know if there's enough scriptural support for just like you said.

Shea Houdmann

So this has been the the second of the five points with total depravity, unconditional election, I'm going to try to do in each episode is kind of show the the chain of how these things work together. The points flow into each other and they'll present a comprehensive case of why Calvinist believed a certain way about God's sovereign and human responsibility. So are we, Kevin, Jeff and I saying that we agree with that whole flow? To varying degrees. But in each of the points there is some things that can be debated and you do not have to agree with absolutely every aspect of every point in order to have a biblical viewpoint on how God's sovereignty works with human responsibility. So hoping you're not hearing confusion in this and just hoping you are hearing like an openness in that these are difficult points. There's theologians for hundreds of years, if not thousands of years, have been debating things to various degrees, and there's a wide range of beliefs you could hold as a Christian on these things. But with that said, there is the Bible does clearly teach election and predestination, and so whether it's unconditional election, we believe that is very close to what the Bible says. The same time do we buy into 100% of everything the Calvinism teaches about this issue? Not necessarily because as you'll hear throughout these episodes, there's a lot of implications that go along with that.

Jeff Laird

Off the top of my head, there's a I think one final thing that we can bring up that's maybe helpful and that's to use a parallel. And that parallel would be prayer. So for example, it's it's not really controversial that people say that God is going to do what God is going to do. He is sovereign. But at the same time he tells us to pray. So we have this sort of mystery in there of God is telling me to pray. He says my prayers are effective. But at the same time he is eternal, timeless, all knowing and sovereign. I can't deny that He's the one who's ultimately in control. I can't deny that he knows whether or not I'm going to pray. But I can't deny that he told me to pray. And that it means something. So in a sense we can look at the way that we see free will and predestination and election in a little bit the same way. So there's tension in the way we look at prayer, but not catastrophe. So that's a good reason for us to say yes, some of this stuff is interesting to think about, but at the end of the day, we really don't need to freak out over it, because even in our day-to-day experience, we can see that we sort of have to balance the idea that God knows, but he still tells me things that I got to respond to.

Shea Houdmann

To absolutely Jeff, well said. The sovereignty of God is not just a matter of salvation. God is sovereign and absolutely everything, and we have responsibility. And like you said, God calls us to pray, but God also says he is when he determines how prayers are answered. So how exactly does that work in God's sovereign plan? Don't know. But we trust in the God who does. This has been the Got Questions podcast on what is unconditional election? It's part of our series on on what is Calvinism. Hope our conversation has been interesting. Hopefully, you understand the this point of Calvinism a little bit better. That's our goal here. We really want to people to understand what Calvinism teaches and which points have a varying degrees of biblical support, so you can make a fully informed theological decision on which viewpoint you hold to. So again, hope our conversation today has been encouraging, edifying to you. Got questions? The Bible has answers and we'll help you find them.