

Election and Covenant

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Who are the elect? Who are born from above? Who are justified and adopted? Are they all who have been baptized and professed faith in Christ? Or are they only those who persevere in such faith unto eternal life? We know that not all who are baptized in fact profess the true faith. We know that some who were baptized and who once professed the true faith, later renounce Christ. And we know there will be some who remained in the faith as men judge it to whom Christ will say "I never knew you." (Matthew 7:23)

We have all met people who were baptized in infancy but grew up to never profess sincerely the faith. By their own mouth they testify that were just pretending to be believers. Should we regard such people as having been elect, born from above (regenerated), justified by faith, and adopted as a child of God. In a word, were they saved but lost their salvation? We all know of people who were baptized and seem to sincerely profess the faith but later renounced Christ. Should we regard such people as having been elect, born from above (regenerated), justified by faith, and adopted as a child of God. In a word, were they saved but lost their salvation? Jesus speaks of people who call him Lord (profess the faith) and who did great works (prophesy, cast out demons, perform miracles), but Jesus will say to them "I never knew you." (Matthew 7:21ff) Should we regard such people as having been elect, born from above (regenerated), justified by faith, and adopted as a child of God. In a word, were they saved but lost their salvation?

The classic Presbyterian answer to these questions is no. Such people, while members of the church as men see it, were in fact not elect, not born of the Spirit, not justified and not adopted. Or to use other terms, they were never in saving union with Jesus Christ. But recently the notion have been popularized that all baptized people are to be regarded as elect, born of the Spirit, justified and adopted. If you are baptized, then you are in union with Christ. A distinction is then made between this "covenantal" election, and that secret election of God in which God infallible chooses some for salvation, and those chosen will be saved. Is this a valid biblical distinction? Is it supported by the teaching of scripture?

First, the Bible clearly teaches an eternal and infallible election in which all those who are chosen will on the last day be fully saved.

John 6:37-40 ³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. ⁴⁰ For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. (NIV)

Romans 8:29-30 ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. (NIV)

In both of these passages, the ones who are given to Christ by the Father, the ones who are foreknown and predestined these are also finally and fully saved. But is there another kind of election than this election of individuals to salvation such that all those chosen will indeed be saved? Yes! In the era of the mosaic covenants, the whole nation of Israel was a chosen people. "Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the LORD has chosen¹ you to be his treasured possession." (NIV Deuteronomy 14:2) What is said in the mosaic covenant of Israel is likewise affirmed of the church in the New Covenant. "But you are a chosen² people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." (NIV 1 Peter 2:9)

So then, can we conclude that all those who are visible members of Israel in the old covenant, or all those who are members of the church in the new covenant, are individually to be considered elect ones? The answer is no! In fact, the Bible makes just the opposite point. Those within the nation of Israel who do not really believe are distinguished from the elect.

Romans 11:5 So too, at the present time there is a remnant **chosen** by grace. (NIV)

Romans 11:7 What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the **elect** did. The others were **hardened**... (NIV)

The nation as a whole was chosen by God to be his treasured possession. But within that nation there were those who were individually elect. They were a remnant chosen by grace. The rest were "hardened." So the biblical term for those in the visible church who never believe, or who renounced the faith, or who are false believers, is not "elect." It is "hardened." Elsewhere Paul refers to such outward members of Israel as "objects of his wrath-- prepared for destruction." (9:22) But in contrast, the elect he refers to as called and foreknown.

Romans 9:22-24 ²² What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the **objects of his wrath**-- prepared for destruction? ²³ What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the **objects of his mercy**, whom he prepared in advance for glory-- ²⁴ even us, whom he also **called**, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? (NIV)

Romans 11:2-5 ² God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah-- how he appealed to God against Israel: ³ "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me"? ⁴ And what was God's answer to him? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." ⁵ So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. (NIV)

So the Apostle Paul teaches us to distinguish between those who are Israel according to the flesh, born of Israelite parents and circumcised in only in the flesh, from those who are elect, foreknown, and called by God. That is to say, we must distinguish between those who are circumcised in heart and those whose circumcision is outward only. So too ought we not to distinguish between those who are born of Christian parents and are whose bodies are baptized

only with water, from those who are chosen, foreknown, called, born of the Spirit and so baptized inwardly by that Spirit?

If the covenant of grace is in its essence the same, though differently administered under the law and now in the gospel, we are compelled to these distinctions. So the Bible in many passages indicates that apostates in the new covenant were never elect, never foreknown, never called inwardly by the Spirit, never sharers in Christ and all his benefits.

Notice in the following passages the condition stated. These are the conditions which are precisely not met by apostates.

Hebrews 3:14 We have come to share in Christ **if** we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. (NIV)

Colossians 1:21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. ²² But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation-- ²³ **if** you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. (NIV)

John formulates the situation in the new covenant in a way strikingly similar to how Paul described Israel.

Romans 9:6 ¶ It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. (NIV)

1 John 2:19 They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. (ESV)

In both cases a distinction is made between those who are outwardly part of the Israel or the church, and those who are in truth part of the Israel of God. Those who renounce the faith were "not of us." And just as Paul distinguishes between outward circumcision only in the flesh from true circumcision, so Peter distinguishes between an outward baptism that only washes the body and a true baptism.

Romans 2:28-29 ²⁸ A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. ²⁹ No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God. (NIV)

1 Peter 3:21 ²¹ and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also-- not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. (NIV)

So then, there are not two individual elections, one based on outward membership in the church (circumcision, baptism) and one based on the eternal purpose of God. There is only one election

of grace. Those who leave the faith or who are hypocrites in the faith, these were never elect, never foreknown, never called, never circumcised by the Spirit, that is, born of the Spirit. So they never had saving faith. Never were they justified. Never were they adopted. Such are the plain and clear declarations of scripture. It is not the case that such “hardened” ones were ever in a saving union with Savior. We have Jesus’ own teaching that such were never his.

Matthew 7:21-23 ²¹ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, **I never knew you.** Away from me, you evildoers!' (NIV)

¹ In this particular instance the LXX uses the same word later used in the New Testament for God choosing.

² The adjective “chosen” in the passage is the cognate of the verb in the LXX of Deuteronomy 14:2.