

What Lutherans Believe

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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Election, Predestination, and Free Will

Read: Ephesians 1:3-14

Election is the teaching that God chooses His people. Translated from the Greek ἐκλεκτός when referring to God's people, this word is most often rendered in English as "favorite", "chosen", "elect".

"The Elect" are picked out or chosen by God to obtain salvation through Christ.

In the Septuagint, this word is used when the Messiah is called "elect", as appointed by God to the most exalted office conceivable.

It can also refer more broadly to God's choice or selection, i.e. the best of its kind or class, most excellence or preeminent (especially when applied to individual Christians.)

A sampling of Bible verses:

Matthew 24:22 (also Mark 13:20)

And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.

Matthew 24:24 (also Mark 13:22)

For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.

Matthew 24:31 (also Mark 13:27)

And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Luke 18:7

And will not God give justice to His elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?

Romans 8:33

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.

Romans 9:11

...though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls....

Romans 11:7

What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened....

Romans 11:28

As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers.

2 Timothy 2:10

Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.

Titus 1:1

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness....

1 Peter 1:1

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia....

2 Peter 1:10

Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.

The concept of election is probably one of the most difficult questions in Christian theology, and one that every believer eventually should understand. So unsurprisingly, Christian churches through the centuries have developed extensive writing and teaching on the subject. There is quite a bit of overlap between teachings that differ in detail, so we'll pay close attention to those areas that are distinct, or do not easily overlap.

Those distinctions between teachings on election are related primarily to the relationship between an individual's personal faith, and God's election of that believer.

The two most popular views are:

- **Calvinist:** God's choice of a person *results* in their personal faith in Christ
- **Arminian:** God chooses a person *because* they put their faith in Christ

Unsurprisingly there are multiple variations of each of these that can be found if you take the time to dig into what is actually taught and confessed by different Christian churches.

The **Arminian** view is rooted in the belief that God loves all people and wants everyone to be saved, and so Jesus died on the cross to make the salvation of all people possible. Arminians believe that the Holy Spirit is needed to convert people, and He acts by restoring people's free will by which they can choose to embrace or reject the gospel, so that if a person is lost, it is because they did not choose to turn to God. However, those who believe may later choose to walk away from God and so fall away from the faith and forfeit salvation. Sometimes called "decision theology", the Arminian view holds that the Christian is cooperative in his salvation. While God makes it possible by giving the person free will to believe or reject God, ultimately the decision of the believer leads to their salvation or condemnation.

The implications of this inform these churches rejection of infant baptism, the belief in an "age of accountability", etc., because the Christian must have the capacity to cooperate in their salvation by their choices and works.

The **Calvinist** view, on the other hand, starts God's absolute sovereignty over all things and humanity's bondage to sin. Man is so sinful that God acts on man's behalf (grace) so that He enables the sinner to turn to Christ in faith. The Calvinist believes that God chooses to enable some people to respond in faith to the gospel, and therefore Jesus died to actually save *those specific people*. If a person is lost, *it is because God did not choose them*. This is sometimes labeled "double predestination" – some are predestined to faith, and others are predestined to unbelief. If a person is truly converted, they will keep the faith because of God's grace, which empowers them to persevere. The Calvinist rejects the notion of free will when it comes to believing – or not believing – in God.

But wait, which one these is Lutheran? What is our doctrine of election?

Neither of them!

Like Calvinists, we reject the notion of man having absolute free will to accept or reject God. We embrace election as God's choice of His people for salvation, which is the driving force behind the principle of "sola gratia" – by *grace alone*.

We also embrace God's desire that all people be saved and affirm that Christ died in order that all people might be saved, which some label as *universal grace*. We also believe that a person can walk away from the faith and forfeit salvation.

If a person is saved, it is because **God** chose them; if a person is lost, it is because of ***their own sin***. Sometimes called "single predestination", we believe and teach that according to scripture, God chooses some for salvation, but God *does not* "choose" the others for damnation.

That leaves us with an unsettling question: Why does God choose some, and allow others to fall away? We cannot say; scripture does not reveal this. It is, therefore, a mystery.

John 6:37

All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.

John 6:44

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.

Acts 13:48

And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.

Romans 9:6-29

⁶ But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, ⁷ and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." ⁸ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. ⁹ For this is what the promise said: "About this time next year I

will return, and Sarah shall have a son.”¹⁰ And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac,¹¹ though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—¹² she was told, “The older will serve the younger.”¹³ As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

¹⁴ What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!¹⁵ For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”¹⁶ So then it depends not on human will or exertion,[a] but on God, who has mercy.¹⁷ For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.”¹⁸ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

¹⁹ You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?”

²⁰ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?”²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?²² What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,²³ in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—²⁴ even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?²⁵ As indeed he says in Hosea,

“Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’
and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’”

²⁶

“And in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’
there they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’”

²⁷ And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: “Though the number of the sons of Israel[b] be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved,²⁸ for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.”²⁹ And as Isaiah predicted,

“If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring,
we would have been like Sodom
and become like Gomorrah.”

1 Timothy 2:4-6

...who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.⁵ For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man[a] Christ Jesus,⁶ who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.

1 Timothy 4:10

For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

2 Peter 2:1

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.

2 Peter 3:9

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

Matthew 23:37

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

1 John 2:2

He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

1 Timothy 1:19-20

...holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith,²⁰ among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.

Lutheran doctrine:

- Affirms the scriptural teaching of God's election of His saints to salvation
- Acknowledges God's desire for all people to be saved
- Acknowledges that man has free will to "shipwreck" his salvation, but not free will to decide whether or not to accept faith in Jesus Christ
- Believes that atonement for sins and election stand side by side in scripture without demanding the universality of atonement (e.g., the Unitarian Universalist view), or that God's desire to atone necessarily limits His decision to elect

In summary, Lutherans believe what the Bible says, and also acknowledge that there are aspects of this which are mysterious, and can only be left to God's sovereignty, which we are not always equipped to understand in full.