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Election Again!

I'm delighted and honored to be with you - thank you so much for the invitation! And I'm always astonished at how many folks will turn up for a something on election. You know you're in good Reformed company when the prospect of a talk on election pulls a crowd.

It gets you wondering, doesn't it? Outside of this room, if we said the word 'election', especially around here of all places, the last thing people would think about is a Christian doctrine. They would be thinking about the primaries leading up to that other election coming up later this year.

And even if we mention the word in Christian circles - or Reformed circles - there are plenty of folks who would rather we talked about death, taxes, sex, or almost anything other than this particular doctrine. Predestination, double predestination, God choosing some for salvation, but not others, God's will, human freedom.... The kinds of things we think of as complex, fearful, surely best avoided...

Over the years I'll admit to having become rather wary about the effect that mentioning the 'e' word will have on people. I have a very unscientific observation about that, based on my own experience, which is that this is doctrine that tends to provoke one of two very elemental responses in most of us. Flight or fight basically. Election tends to be that kind of a doctrine. It gets the adrenalin going one way or another.

So, when I was doing my PhD thesis on election, inevitably people would ask the well meaning question, 'What's your research about?' And I would say, 'The doctrine of election', and one of two things would happen. First the 'flight' thing - you could just see the apprehensive look that came into people's eyes when I said what I was writing about, and they did the conversational equivalent of backing away *very* fast. 'Oh, really? The doctrine of election, hey? Well, that must be very interesting for you' but you could see the panic welling up, and what they were really saying inside was, 'Help, get me outta here!!!! I'm trapped with some kind of theological madwoman!!!'.

Then there is the other kind of response. The person's eyes light up and they go, 'Ohhhhhh!!! Election!!! Now that's seriously cool' and then before you know it they are on tiptoe, spoiling for a fight on Calvinism vs Arminianism vs universalism and so on.

I did my PhD in the United Kingdom, and I have to say that 99% of the time over there, and also where I'm from, in Australia, it would be the 'get me out of here' flight reaction. Mostly, over there, the doctrine of election, as I mentioned earlier, is like death, sex, taxes, all rolled into one. You just *do not* mention it in polite theological company.

Now that I'm in here in the US, though, yes, there's definitely still the 'flight' response, but let's just say that there's a *lot* more of the 'bring it on' fight sort of thing in the way that folks over here respond to it. There's a certain way of being Reformed over here that seems to define itself by nothing else other than election - never mind that there are so many more crucial aspects to what it means to be Reformed than whether you plant theological TULIPs in your garden. Do you all know what I mean when I talk about TULIP? The so-called 5 points of Calvinism? I'll say a bit more about TULIP later, but let's just spell this out now - what does the T stand for? etc.

I'm afraid the historical theologian in me always has a bit of a chuckle when someone who is adamantly against infant baptism, for example, claims to be Reformed, simply because of their take on election - because they believe TULIP. I think to myself, well, you might very well think that, but Calvin would have had you thrown out of Geneva. There is *so much more* to being Reformed than the doctrine of election.... but right now, there's a way of being Reformed that is nothing more than theological machismo over this one doctrine.

And let's be honest, that means that for many of the rest of us Reformed folks, we just wish the whole thing would go away. We think to ourselves, isn't this a doctrine that is more trouble than it's worth? Isn't it a doctrine that has caused more harm than good? It has left some people spiritually tormented, wondering if they are elect or not, and so whether they are saved or not. For those of us who know our history, we know that this is a doctrine that nearly caused a civil war in the Netherlands in the 17th Century. It has caused angry confrontations down the centuries within our Reformed tradition, and between us and other Protestants. It's a doctrine that has been abused in many, many ways, including in the conquest of native peoples by colonialists, and including playing a significant role in the development of the system of Apartheid in South Africa. With a history like that, wouldn't it be better not to mention it at all. Wouldn't it be better if we just quietly locked this mad doctrine up in the theological attic?

Not surprisingly, my answer is 'NO' to that. And one of the reasons is that we need to say a lot more about it. Here's the thing - whether our response to the mention of this doctrine is flight or fight, whether we are flight people or fight people, *all* of us tend to say way too little about election. *All* of us. What do I mean by that?

Well, if our first instinct is to want to flee the room whenever the subject is mentioned, that's a problem, because as we'll see, the concept of election is absolutely central to scripture, and the whole scriptural story. We cannot avoid it and we must not. We simply *cannot* speak of how the promises and purposes of God will unfold without talking about election. And what's more, we can't even begin to talk about what it means to be the people of God - what it means to be the church, and not just the church in general, I mean what we are all called to be and do in our local congregations - without talking about election. We mustn't avoid this doctrine if we want to honor the story that God tells in scripture.

So, flight won't do. But if our first instinct is to relish a fight over the controversial stuff, then we are still saying way too little about election in another kind of way. The controversial stuff has always been about the individual salvation side of the doctrine, because that's where there are so many disagreements, but that has become the total focus of the doctrine for many people, the only thing that it's 'about'. So, when someone says 'the doctrine of election', most of us immediately think about God picking and choosing individuals for salvation or not, or those 5 points of Calvinism vs Arminianism and so on.

Now, there are some extremely important, indeed fundamental, theological issues at stake in those debates, and I'll spell some of those out in a moment. BUT if we make it seem like that is all that election is about, that is way too narrow, we are saying far too little, and it seriously distorts the much larger scriptural picture. Put it this way, if the whole biblical picture of election is this size (large circle), then individual election in scripture is about this much of it (small section of it). That is why I think that even election 'fight' people, even the ones who never seem to shut up about the doctrine, often end up saying way too little about it.

So, flight from thinking about election is a pretty bad idea, biblically speaking. But it's an equally bad idea, biblically speaking, to equate 'thinking about election' with theological pitbulls mauling one another over a TULIP.

In this talk what I'm going to do is suggest an approach to election that helps us to root our Reformed priorities in the bigger scriptural picture, with the hope that it might also help us to relate the doctrine of election, - which can sometimes seem very abstract, let's be honest, as well as very scary - to our discipleship and worship in fresh ways.

This isn't at all to *replace* what we usually think of as a Reformed understanding of election. It is to say that what we normally think of relates to one small section of the scriptural witness on election, which means we still have so much more to talk about, and we very rarely do.

What I'm going to do first is a very quick sketch of the basic contours of the Reformed approach to election. The kind of thing that we normally think of when we talk about it, but I'm not going to spend too much time on those petals of TULIP. I think that's an acronym that I has done more harm than good. First, it only works in English!! Second, it was invented by someone in the 20th century (we think - no one has ever owned up to it, and historians have never been able to track the person down) as an attempt to summarize the 17th C Canons of Dordt on election, but it isn't really the best summary of the Canons. (And as those of us who are Canons geeks know, the points of TULIP aren't even in the right order in relation to the points of the Canons. If we were going to be really geeky about it, the Canons order is ULTIP, which kind of messes things up! We can talk more about the Canons of Dordt in the question time if you like). Third, as I mentioned earlier, there is so much more to being Reformed than planting tulips in our theological gardens, but too many people think that all that it means to be Reformed is to think a certain way about election. Finally, and most importantly of all, so many of those terms are deeply misleading without a LOT of explanation, especially total depravity, limited atonement, and irresistible grace. They are so easily misunderstood. Again, we can talk more about that in the questions if you like.

The actual theological concepts behind the points are crucial, but sometimes the TULIP acronym isn't entirely helpful to get those across. What I'm going to do instead is give you another set of points to give us a Reformed framework for thinking about election. If your theological antennae are up, you'll see that they cover all theological points of TULIP but in a rather different way, and especially, in a way that every single Reformed theologian down the centuries could say 'Amen' to. As many of you probably know, a number of Reformed theologians after the 16th and 17th centuries continued to wrestle with some aspects of the Canons, and the conclusion that the historic Reformed tradition came to - that God chooses to save some, and not to save others - and tried to articulate a Reformed approach to election in different ways. What I'm about to share with you both captures the core of what the Canons had to say, and is a way of putting it that all Reformed theologians down the centuries, from Calvin to the Canons, through Schleiermacher in the 19th century - the so-called father of liberal theology! - to Karl Barth in the 20th could sign up to, so to speak. No matter what else they think or say about election, everyone agrees that these are the things you have to say about it from a Reformed point of view. So here we go!

First up, election is **eternal**. That's pretty uncontroversial, in that no matter how people understand other aspects of election, almost everyone agrees that whatever election is, it is from before the foundation of the world, as the letter to the Ephesians puts it. It's actually a major statement to make, though, because it means that election is at the core of God's purposes from all eternity. That's one of the reasons why it's not a good idea to ignore it.

The next three points, though, are distinctively Reformed. No Arminian could agree with these.

So, the second point is that **election it is unconditional** – it is God's sovereign choice, not based on anything about us, positive or negative. God does not foresee things about us and base his electing of us on that. (That's pretty obviously the U of TULIP too!)

Third, **no one can turn to God without the Spirit's effectual enabling.** We can't come to acknowledge God, we can't come to faith in Christ, on our own. It is the gift of God. The problem of sin is that we are and will remain basically blind and deaf to God until he opens our eyes and our ears to him. We need to be set free by God for God. And by the 'effectual enabling' of the Spirit, we Reformed mean that when the Spirit works in and for us to enable us to turn to God, he does not leave us in some sort of neutral spot. He truly sets us free, so that we freely and joyfully choose to turn to God in faith. (T and I)

Fourth, **Christ's work achieves and secures salvation.** When we say that Christ's work *achieves* salvation we mean that it does not simply create the *possibility* of salvation, that we then complete by mustering up faith all by ourselves and sticking with it. From a Reformed perspective, we can't do that, and that would also make election conditional upon something we do. We strongly maintain that scripture says election is unconditional, and that faith is not something we *add* to what Christ has done. Faith is the gift by which we *appropriate* the salvation he has achieved. When we say that Christ's work *secures* salvation, we mean that if we are united to Christ by the Spirit through faith, then nothing and no-one can snatch us from the Father's hand. (the theological point behind L, and P)

As Reformed folks, then, those are central things for us - election is eternal; it is unconditional; we can't turn to God on our own, and so need God to enable us to come to him in faith; and Christ's death doesn't just bring about the possibility of salvation, which we then actualize by ourselves. Christ's death saves whomever God intends to save. In these 4 affirmations, you have the essence of everything that Calvin and the Canons of Dordt are seeking to uphold, and something that all Reformed thinkers would agree is at the core of how to think about the doctrine of election. These things are the bottom line of what we think is scripturally and theologically true about how God relates to us and we to him.

With that in place, though, what are some *other* things that we need to say about election if we're going to try to paint a fuller scriptural picture of it? Because while the things I have just mentioned are important, and they are what separates us from other theological traditions on election, again, the things we argue about with Arminians are a fraction of what the Bible has to say about election, and we need to think our way into some of the rest of scripture's perspective on it.

So, for the rest of the time, I'm just going to draw out two among the many big ideas that swirl around the concept of election in scripture. This isn't remotely going to be a comprehensive summary of the scriptural witness on the subject. I'm not making any claims that the ideas I'll share with you here are *the* way to approach the subject of election from a biblical perspective or anything. I'm simply going to suggest a couple of themes that strike me as potentially very fruitful for all of us, in terms of how the rubber of this doctrine might hit the road of our Christian walk and the life of our churches.

The first theme I'd like us to think about is that from the outset, a primary function in God's electing is *to further his purposes of blessing beyond the elect community.*

And the second is that an important aspect of belonging to the elect community is *the call to represent God to others and to represent others to God.* The idea is that part of the role of the elect community is a calling to mediate the promises and purposes and presence of God to the world, and to stand before God on behalf of the world in a mediating role.

For those of you whose theological antennae might be buzzing wildly at this point, fear not!! Christ alone is THE Mediator, capital M, between us and God. I am not for a moment saying that

we somehow replace Christ in these roles, or that we add to what he has accomplished once and for all. But the wondrous thing about our election is that those who are in Christ are called and equipped to participate in the unfolding of his finished work between the ascension and his coming again. By the Spirit, we are all given our bit parts to play in mediating the reality of what Christ has done to the world, and in holding those outside the community of the church before God.

To show you the role of these themes in the scriptural account of election, what I'm going to do now is tell you a story. It's one you know incredibly well. It is the big-picture story of the whole Bible. But I'm going to tell it through the lens of election, understood in this way: as the call to be a channel of blessing to those outside the elect community, and the call to represent God to others and others to God. I'm doing this to help you to see that election is not simply the story of how some people get saved. Election is the story of the whole of God's promises and purposes for all of creation. And that is why we HAVE to talk about it, and we HAVE to talk about more than just Calvinism vs Arminianism. And it's why it's actually good and exciting to talk about election, because we see that it tells us our place in the glorious story, and gives us the parts we are called to play in it.

As I tell this story, though, the focus to start with will be on Israel and then on Jesus, because that's where we see set out for us in scripture the pattern of election into which the church is then also called. So as I'm describing themes in relation to Israel and Jesus, I'm hoping you'll start having some 'Aha!' moments about what this might mean for us as individuals and as the body of Christ. Towards the end, I'll start to make some connections along those lines for you, and then leave you with some questions to help you keep on thinking about how election might impact your walk with Christ rather more than you might otherwise have thought.

To get a sense of the big scriptural picture of election, we actually need to start right back at the first chapters of Genesis. When Old Testament scholars talk about the image of God, about what human beings were created to be and to do, one of the most important themes that many of them point out is that human beings are to represent God in and to the rest of creation. Part of our calling, as the one creature that God has chosen to be in a unique relationship with himself, part of that original calling for human beings, is to mediate something of the presence of God in and to the world, and to be his vice-regents, the agents of his purposes for the whole of creation. That's the ideal, the intention. That is what human beings are set apart to be and to do.

But sin - being out of right relationship with God - messes up our capacity to represent God, and disrupts the trajectory that God desires for human beings and the whole of creation. The first 11 chapters of Genesis help us to see that very clearly. They are 'big picture' chapters - about the creation of the world as a whole, about human beings as a whole, about the universal effects of sin. Then all of a sudden something remarkable and puzzling happens. *Election* happens. The election of Abram, to be precise, and through him, the people of Israel. After the wide angle lens of Genesis 1-11, with its focus on all creation and humanity in general, from Genesis 12 onwards the entire OT focus is narrowed down firstly on one man and then through him the people of Israel.

The point of Genesis 12 in the structure of the book of Genesis is actually to show us God's answer to the problem of sin. *Election* is God's answer to human sin. Among other things, God's foundational promise to Abram in Genesis 12:1-3 shows us that God's election of Abram and through him, his people Israel, is God's chosen means *to continue to further his purposes of blessing in the face of human rebellion against him*. In other words, one of the major answers to the question, 'What is God's eternal election all about?!' is not simply 'Saving some people', it is way bigger than that. It is all about sin not derailing God's intentions for human beings, and for creation as a whole, although I don't have time to go into that side of things today.

So, I can't emphasize strongly enough that in electing Abram and through him, Israel, God is NOT therefore giving up on everyone and everything else, and washing his hands of everyone except the little huddle of his chosen people. It is incredibly important to say that, because for many people, that *is* in fact what they think election is all about.

Again, election in scripture does NOT mean, and has never meant, God giving up on everyone else. It actually means totally the opposite. God is here singling out a chosen people *for the sake of* everyone and everything else. In the foundational election text of Genesis 12, Abram, and through him, the people Israel, will be the means of bringing God's blessing beyond Israel to the nations. Judgment too, because how people respond to God's people is how they respond God. But the overwhelming priority in this text is blessing. There are many and varied strands in the OT concerning the relationship between the other nations and Israel and God, but this one is foundational. It is a golden thread that we can follow to Jesus, the one in whom all God's promises find their Yes and Amen.

Intrinsic to election, then, from the beginning is that first theme I mentioned - being called to be an instrument to bring blessing beyond the elect community. As the one people who know the promises and the purposes of God, the elect are called to be the bearers and instruments of God's promises and purposes in the world.

And part of that calling is the second theme I mentioned. It is to fulfill a task that should have been all of humanity's - to represent God in and to the world. Remember that this is what the scholars help us to see is a major aspect of human beings as created in the image of God? And how sin distorts our capacity to do this?

Well, this representational task now devolves especially on to the elect people of God, the ones who are in covenant relationship with him. They are set apart to represent something of God's character in the world, and to be mediators of his presence. They alone are the ones who truly know who God is, and how we should live before him, they have received his promises and his covenant relationship, they are the ones to whom has been revealed something of his purposes.

Ideally, Israel was supposed to show, simply by their relationship with God and with others, what God is like and how we are called to live before him. Israel wasn't particularly called to 'do mission' in the way that we understand evangelism as Christians. That is something that becomes central to the calling of God's people after the resurrection of Jesus. For Israel, simply by *being* the faithful people of God, walking in right relationship with him, they would fulfill their role of representing something of God in the world, and ideally, would draw people from other nations to come to know and worship God.

This gives us something of a sense of the 'representing God to others' side of things. What about election as representing others to God, though? How does Israel represent others to God? Well, this idea is only really present by inference in the OT. It only becomes clearer as we look at Jesus. But even in the OT, some scholars point to hints of this in the designation of Israel as a 'kingdom of priests' in Ex 19. That is the 'royal priesthood' designation taken up in 1 Peter to refer to the church. And the hint here is that perhaps God's elect people have a 'priestly' role - a representational and mediating role - towards the other nations, as a kind of bridge that would make communion between the world and God possible.

But Israel can't do any of this properly. Israel messes up, all the time. Israel is as much affected by sin as all the other nations. This leads us to one other very important way that we can think of Israel as representing others to God. It is because Israel in some ways represents in itself the whole situation of humanity. Human beings were created for right relationship with God, but sin has distorted that, so that human beings are alienated from God. In electing a people for unique,

covenanted relationship with himself - and a people who, because they too are sinful, fall short of what they are called out to be and do - Israel is like a microcosm of the whole of humanity. The elect people represent what all human beings are created for, and they have that explicit covenant relationship with God, but they also represent how all human beings fail to sustain their side of that. It is as if in themselves the elect people of God represent the whole of humanity back to God, in what all human beings are called to be and what they actually are. So, the elect people of Israel represents the whole situation of humanity in themselves - created for self-conscious, loving, obedient relationship with God, but because of sin, unable to sustain their side of the relationship. That's the whole story of the OT from Genesis 12 onwards in a nutshell.

And this is where Jesus comes in, as Israel's *representative* Messiah. We always need to remind ourselves that in Jesus, God doesn't just come to us as a human being in general. He comes as Jew in particular. God comes to us as a member of his own covenant people and that is incredibly important. Jesus is both sides of that covenant in person. He is the faithful covenant God, still working in and through his election of Israel to bring about the promised wider blessing through that election that has been the intention of his election of Israel from the outset. And in Jesus he is the perfectly faithful human covenant partner who walks in total love and perfect obedience towards the Father in the way that human beings in general and the elect people in particular were created and called to do, but could not do. He is perfect Israel. And if you remember, part of Israel's election includes representatively sharing in the messed up situation of the whole of humanity, on the rest of humanity's behalf. Jesus takes on all of that. He is the one who takes on the sins of the world, precisely because he takes on all that Israel is and represents in its election.

When it comes to spelling out the representational side of this even further: very obviously, he is God in person, so Jesus uniquely represents God to us. But also, you don't have to think about it for too long to realize that at the core of what he comes to be and to do is to represent others to God - very specifically, all those who are alienated from God. All he does from his coming amongst us through his ministry to his death and resurrection he does for our sake on our behalf in our place, representing us. So, you could say that Christ most fully represents who God is to us - the outgoing, self-giving love of the Triune God - by representing the alienated other to God.

What all of this means is that in scripture, election - on God's side and on the human side - culminates in Jesus himself. In and through Israel's representative election, culminating in Israel's representative Messiah, God brings about exactly what he promised with regard to election in the first place - blessing *for* and *through* and *beyond* the elect community.

What all of this also means is that the New Testament redraws the boundaries for who belongs to the elect community. As I've said, Jesus *is* the whole of the covenant in person - the covenant faithful electing God and the perfectly faithful covenant partner. So, following the death and resurrection of Christ, to be 'in covenant' - to be a member of the elect community - is the same as being 'in Christ'. And as the NT makes clear, we come to be 'in Christ' only by the Spirit through faith, Jew and Gentile alike. So to be elect is to be in Christ by the Spirit through faith. Whoever has faith in Jesus is of the elect.

It is basically how people interpret *this* one part of election - how individuals come to be 'in Christ', and very specifically, how we come to faith - that lies at the heart of the Calvinism/Arminianism disputes. Can we come to that faith by ourselves, or do we need the efficacious work of the Holy Spirit? If you're Arminian, you think it's the former. If you're Reformed, like I said earlier, no one can turn to the Lord without the Spirit's effectual enabling. And these are hugely important theological questions. I think one of these answers is scripturally and theologically correct - the Reformed one, that left to ourselves, we cannot possibly turn to Christ, we need to be set free by God for God - and the other is not.

BUT, thinking about the broad sweep of election in the context of the big picture story of the Bible helps us to realize that these issues are only one part of what election is all about. And while election in Christ most certainly *does* involve individual salvation, scripturally speaking election can never be *reduced* to a way of accounting for personal salvation. Election is big! As I said earlier, it has in view the entire of God's purposes for the whole created order. Thinking about these broader contours of election helps us to realize that there is a whole lot more to election than the disputes that divide us - we may all have far more of the big scriptural picture of election in common than we tend to think.

And now, as those who have faith in Christ, however we think that comes about, the elect community of the church steps into the same basic pattern and purpose of election that has characterized Israel and Israel's representative Messiah, Jesus.

So what might it mean for the life of the church, for God's elect people in Christ, that we now take our place in this big scriptural picture of election?

Well, no matter what else we'd want to say about election, we need to keep at the forefront that election is fundamentally for the sake of *furthering God's purpose of blessing beyond the elect community*. God sets apart an elect people as the bearers and instruments of his promises and purposes, as the means by which God is going to continue to let his blessings flow, even in the face of human sin. We see that from the outset in Israel's election and see the culmination of that in Christ.

Scripture indicates that at its core, election is always *for the sake of* the 'other'. So, against all the subtle and not so subtle temptations in the opposite direction, the church - the congregation - can never conceive of itself as existing for its own sake. As I've been saying all along, election was never about God choosing one set of people in order to abandon everyone else. The primary reason why God elects a people for himself is to further his wider purposes of blessing *beyond the elect community itself*.

To put it bluntly, this way of thinking about election reminds us that a large part of the reason why the church exists is for the sake of everyone else. That has been the pattern all along - the chosen one for the sake of the alienated many. It helps us as the church to remind ourselves quite frequently that, scripturally speaking, the visible community of the church is NOT the sole focus of God's purposes in election. Election has always been 'for' the other, right from the promise of God to and through Abraham, through to the redeeming seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ. The elect community of the church is to conform to that pattern too, as a channel of God's blessing for those who apparently lie outside the promises of God. It isn't all about us, folks.

And what about the representational dynamic that goes with this understanding of election? The mediating role of the elect community. What does it mean to say that a defining aspect of our election is to represent God to others and others to God?

I'm guessing that the idea of representing God to others is one we can all grasp fairly easily. You might not have thought about *election* in these terms before, but the concept is one we're all familiar with.

So, in the same way as Israel, simply by being who we are as individual Christ-followers and as church communities, by seeking to live out of our relationship with Christ, we hope and pray that we show something of character of God in Christ to those who encounter us, even though that is always going to be only partial and flawed.

And then very obviously, we represent who God is to others by quite literally getting out there and telling people about him - his promises, his purposes, his character as we have come to know all of these things in Christ. The church is the only community in the world where as much as can be known of the fullness of God's promised blessings is known, and through which this is mediated. No other people know and taste the reality of what God has done in Christ. It is through the body of Christ that the redemption and reconciliation won in Christ are made known in the world.

So representing God to others happens in relatively unselfconscious ways as well as very intentional ways. And I'm sure you can think of many specific examples of how we do that individually and corporately. The rather harder concept for us to get our heads around, I think, is the second half of the representational dynamic - representing others to God. What does it mean to say that we are called to represent others to God?

Here's something that might help us. There is one very important and obvious way that you and I do this every single day, and I hope it is part of every single corporate act of worship that we attend or lead, and that is intercessory prayer. As we pray for others we are representing others - and re-presenting others - to Christ. This is especially the case when we hold up those who are as yet alienated from God, who aren't yet believers or who have drifted away from Christ. We are effectively standing in for them before God, provisionally, in their place. We are standing on their behalf where, for the moment at least, they can't be for themselves.

Now, without a doubt, Jesus is the one true Intercessor, capital I. In this secondary priestly work of ours we aren't trespassing on his sole High Priesthood. We are doing what we do at his invitation and command. Jesus commands us to pray for others. That is a profound and beautiful thing. Our intercessions, in all their flawed and broken inadequacy, are graciously taken up and purified by the Spirit to be joined to Christ's. This means that our prayers aren't remotely needed to 'complete' Christ's, as if his needed supplementing in some way, but neither are our prayers redundant. Instead, it is the most amazing gift of grace that those who are in Christ by faith are given to participate in his priestly work. Intercessory prayer is a really helpful model for us to think more widely about how the elect community may represent others to God, not in place of Christ or in addition to Christ, but in dependence upon and with Christ.

So, intercessory prayer is one way to help us think about what it means to represent others to God. Here's a second. Think of this as an extension of the pattern of election that I described in relation to Israel. If you remember, one facet of Israel's election is that it represents the whole human situation before God - created for right relationship with God, and yet unable to maintain that relationship. That is true of the church too, now in the light of what Christ has done. Just by being the people who on the one hand are reconciled to the Father in Christ by the Spirit, but on the other, still share in the brokenness and rebellion of the world too, the church represents the whole human situation in itself, and in its own brokenness, it holds the brokenness of others representatively before God.

I think this is very important, because it helps us as individuals and as congregations to be honest and real about ourselves. Yes, we are the elect community in Christ, but we know we are still broken, and boy do we show that brokenness, in our own lives, in our church life, and as we engage with those outside the church. That is both our sin and our shame, *but it is also* an element within our election, and a very significant one. That is not to minimize our sin - just as for Israel, our sin is actually magnified, because we are the ones who know God and what he has done for us and what he asks of us - BUT the reality that we too share in the sinfulness of humanity as a whole is part of the representational dynamic of election. We stand before God as his chosen but sinful people, and we stand there on behalf all those who still live in rebellion

against and alienation from him. The elect community stands before God on behalf of all those who as yet do not know him, but whose need of him is the same as our need of him.

In addition to intercessory prayer, and the way that the church holds the whole human situation in itself, here is a third way to help us to get our heads around something of what it means to say that the church is called to represent others to God. Here, I am drawing very much on the biblical scholar N. T. Wright. Wright speaks of the church as the place where the world's pain and grief are concentrated, because our election is Christ-shaped, and therefore cross-shaped. For the sake of God's purposes of blessing and restoration, Christ took upon himself the whole pain and shame and grief of what it means for human beings to be alienated from God. As part of the working out of the implications of his redemption until his coming again, Wright suggests that part of the church's calling needs to be to seek out those places and circumstances in which pain and grief and shame and alienation from God still dominate, and take on something of the burden of that, seeking to be agents of God's coming kingdom of justice, love, redemption, and reconciliation. And just as is the case with intercessory prayer, we don't do this because somehow Christ's work is incomplete until we chip in with our bit. Rather, the privilege and responsibility of the elect community is to play our part alongside Christ in the unfolding of his completed work between his ascension and his coming again.

What this means is that action with and on behalf of others should be *intrinsic to the church's understanding of its election*. There is no such thing as a holy huddle, withdrawn from the brokenness and messiness of the world. By the Spirit we are called and enabled to bring something of a foretaste of the redemption won by Christ by becoming the instruments of God's presence and healing and blessing in situations where brokenness seems to prevail, even as we need to acknowledge our own brokenness too.

That means there can be no triumphalism and no isolationism for the elect community. The pattern of election under the situation of sin always includes the elect bearing something of the brokenness and alienation of those who are seemingly outside the promises of God, in order that blessing may flow from God through the elect community to others. Election costs, folks. Election hurts.

In the light of all of this, here are just two questions you might like to think about as you reflect on the broad picture of election that I have painted for you this morning, to help you to relate election to your day to day life in Christ in ways that maybe you hadn't thought of before.

1) What might it mean for you, and also for your churches, if you used this idea as a touchstone: in what ways do our discipleship, our worship, our activities as a church, enable and encourage us to represent God to others and others to God?

And then,

2) In what ways do you, in your discipleship, and your churches, take on and hold before God some of the brokenness - the pain, shame, the struggle - of the communities in which you are situated? What does that look like? What might that look like?

So there you have it - two huge questions to help you to begin to apply the ideas I've thrown out to you this morning. I hope that I've been able to give you some resources to spark your own thinking, and to help you to embrace a larger vision for what election might mean - and one that doesn't get immediately and irretrievably bogged down in endless repetition of the debates we've been having for centuries. Those debates are important, but they are just one small facet of what election is about in scripture.

One of the reasons why I spelled out some Reformed non-negotiables earlier in this lecture is to ground these broader themes where we Reformed folks stand. But the broader approach to election that I've painted here - election for the sake of furthering God's purposes of blessing, and election entailing representing God to others and others to God - is one that anyone can take up. So, yes, we Reformed folks, but also, Wesleyan Arminians, Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Mennonites, Christians who refuse labels. Everyone can think about election - about what it means to be the people of God - in these big picture scriptural categories.

And perhaps in this way we can all realize that there is important scriptural common ground that we can all share on this. There are aspects of election that will continue to divide us until the Lord returns and settles such things once and for all, probably by showing us how wrong we all are about some things. In the meanwhile, I hope the two themes I've highlighted today will be fruitful ones for us to plant in our Reformed soil, to help us keep on thinking about what we are called to be and do as God's elect people in Christ. Thank you!