

## 2016 Convocation Responses to the Rev. Dr. Suzanne McDonald

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When we invited the Rev. Dr. Suzanne McDonald to give the 2016 Convocation presentation we knew we would get a clear, engaging and thoughtful theological talk. But we also got eager and passionate comments from many who attended. That led us to solicit responses to the substance of the text as a follow-up; a way of continuing the conversation. We contacted several members of the Reformed Institute's Company of Teachers, Board of Directors, and regular attendees at RI programs with this request: Would you be willing to write a response to one or more of the claims Dr. McDonald made in her presentation?

Here are some of those responses. Click the name of the responder below to navigate directly to their response. In addition, we have asked Dr. McDonald if she would be willing to reply, in a broad way, to the responses. You can look forward to that reply within the week.

[The Rev. James F. Cubie](#) | [The Rev. Dr. E. Quinn Fox](#) | [Mr. Roland Frenck](#) | [Dr. Melissa Kirkpatrick](#) | [Mrs. Doris B. Mabrey](#) | [Dr. Victoria Pedrick](#) | [Mr. Adrian Steel](#) | [The Rev. Dr. Kerry Stoltzfus](#) | [Mr. Matthew D. Taylor](#) | [Ms. Ann Timmons](#) | [Mr. Paul Wackerbarth](#) | [Dr. Ann B. White](#)

**The Rev. James F. Cubie, Associate Pastor, Leesburg Presbyterian Church and Reformed  
Institute Company of Teachers**

At the Reformed Institute Convocation, Dr. McDonald offered a superb, lively overview of what Reformed Christians hold in common when they speak about the “big topics” related to election.

I will focus on the “preservation/perseverance of the saints”. It entails the belief that once you are “in”, nothing you do can cause you to fall away – to lose your salvation. The glaring issue with this teaching is that Jesus – more than any other figure in the New Testament – warns about the possibility of final separation from God.

In light of this, Christians appear to have two options (universalism just isn’t clearly taught in the New Testament):

1. God chooses some to save and to keep, no matter what kind of sin they fall into, while everyone else is consigned to eternal separation from Christ in this life and the next.
2. The Christian life is an imperfect, but Spirit-led struggle to fight sin, death, and the devil. Only those who fight to remain in communion with Christ, will finally be with Christ in the new heavens and the new earth. Those who willfully, and repeatedly, reject the grace they have been - and are daily - shown in Christ, will not.

Which of these two views does justice to Christ’s clear warnings in Scripture? Which does justice to the One who: became human in Jesus Christ; sacrificed himself because he loved the world; and, promises to be with us, as we struggle to be his people? I believe the latter view does full justice to what Scripture teaches concerning election, salvation, and the Christian life, and fully honors the character of God, as revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The former makes of God a monster who damns many before they even get on the playing field.

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**The Rev. Dr. E. Quinn Fox, Associate Pastor for Discipleship and Christian Formation, National Presbyterian Church**

Dr. McDonald made a fine case for understanding election well beyond TULIP. Her talk expands the PCUSA *Book of Order's* statement: God's People are elect "for service as well as salvation" (F-2.05).

She genuinely helps retrieve this central doctrine, enabling us to overcome our "fight or flight" reactions to "the 'E' word." All the same, she avoided (after paragraph 3)—no doubt wisely—an important related doctrine largely responsible for the polarizing reactions: *Predestination*... "the 'P' word."

Scholars tell us that the Old Testament idea of election (found in Genesis 12, Deuteronomy 7, Isaiah 49ff.) developed and was put into its current form during Israel's exile in Babylon. Faced with the possibility of extinction, God's people worked out a theology of God's purpose for them as his chosen people, beginning with Abraham—and extending even to Babylon.

But the notion that God *predestined* an elect people is nowhere in the Old Testament.

The Apostle Paul introduced it, arguing that God determined the destiny of God's elect "before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:3). Amidst potential persecution in Rome, Paul encouraged believers that their salvation in Christ was secure—foreknown and predestined—apart from the world of "hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword" (Romans 8:28, 35; 9-11).

Predestination in the Bible serves to encourage God's people amidst affliction or tribulation: exiled to Babylon, marginalized by Roman Emperors. Predestination grounds our confidence that we are indeed elect—despite any circumstances we might face.

Later theologians, beginning with Augustine—and especially the Reformed Scholastics—reasoned that God made decrees "before time" to elect some, but not all, to salvation. This subordinates election to predestination—something the Bible does not do. Ironically Paul's intended foundation for confidence as God's elect has become the chief stumbling block for the modern Reformed mind.

Dr. McDonald's presentation, while avoiding the 'P' word, sets election back on its proper biblical trajectory.

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**Mr. Roland Frenck, Ruling Elder, Darnestown Presbyterian Church and Reformed Institute  
Board of Directors**

You don't hear many sermons on election these days. It tends to be avoided as a Sunday morning topic for multiple reasons. Perhaps foremost, because most of us would prefer to concentrate on more positive scripture messages such as John 6:40 and Romans 10:13 which respectively state: "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 them up at the last day"; and "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Congregations are understandably uncomfortable when faced with what appears to be conflicting Bible passages such as Luke 13: 23-24; or, Matthew 19: 24 which state "Someone asked him, Lord are only a few people going to be saved? He said to them, Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to"; and, "Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

The idea of election runs counter to Americans' core beliefs in equal opportunity for all and self-determination. Most of us immediately reject any suggestion that we might somehow be found unworthy of membership in a private club regardless of our achievements. This is especially true if the club in question is heaven and God is the one setting the standards for admission.

While I am sure that Rev. McDonald must have been tempted to pursue one of the already well argued questions surrounding personal or corporate salvation when she selected the topic of election for her Ph.D. thesis, she instead turned towards a less obvious matter. Namely, that election involves more than a determination of who is and isn't saved. Election also places an obligation on those that are chosen to help fulfill God's objectives while they are here on earth by representing God to others and others to God. As novel as this particular view of election is, it immediately provides us with needed insight into the long standing question of what is the linkage between election and human responsibility. It also helps to motivate us to action. As Rev. McDonald states: "... 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." This is a message that is worthy of being repeated.

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**Dr. Melissa Kirkpatrick, Direction of Education Ministries, Manassas Presbyterian Church and Reformed Institute Company of Teachers**

Reactions to the offer of an adult education course on election or predestination will often result in that slight choking sound you'd get if the offer came to replace the sedate maroon pew cushions with something in a nice shade of acid green.

But Professor McDonald has offered us another way to think about this topic for the church and a challenging corrective to stereotyped predestinarian thinking. The individualism of American culture, which saturates the church, has prevented us from seeing the doctrine of election as anything but God choosing some and casting out others. Since the beginning of English settlements here, the "visible saints" have looked on the hopelessly flawed world as a project best left to God. The elect of God kept to themselves.

For Professor McDonald, however, election should, in fact, be understood as God electing a people to further God's "wider purposes of blessing beyond the elect community itself." As she explains, Jesus shows us both sides of the covenant in himself — God reaching out in complete love to a flawed community and, at the same time, showing the obedience to God that the elect of God are called to offer. A community so elected is called, with the Spirit's help, to be a blessing beyond itself. It is called to bear the broken world before the God who so loves it.

Election is large. There is so much more to it than salvation of an individual. With only the slightest apology to Walt Whitman, it contains multitudes.

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**Mrs. Doris B. Mabrey, Ruling Elder, First Presbyterian Church, Arlington and Former Moderator, National Capital Presbytery**

*“The call to represent God to others and to represent others to God.”*

I find the Doctrine of the *Imago Dei* to be very compelling. So, when Dr. McDonald used the above sentence in her discussion of Election, it made me sit up and take notice.

In the Sunday school class that I’m leading, recently we talked about the *Imago Dei* as meaning that we are “image bearers” of God. This flows directly into Dr. McDonald’s point that as members of the elect community we are called to represent God to others and to represent others to God.

Dr. McDonald’s point that election is about more than personal salvation ties into this concept also. As we are ALL “created in the image of God”, we, individually and as a community of elect people, are also ALL called to be God’s “image bearers”.

She spoke of the *Imago Dei*, but for me emphasis on this doctrine of the church seems appropriate. As members of the elect community and as God’s “image bearers” we have a huge responsibility and the opportunity for great joy. That responsibility has nothing to do with basking in our elect status or lording it over those who we deem to be not among the elect. It has to do with claiming our elect status and the knowledge of being “created in the image of God.” It has to do with living our lives as people who joyfully respond to God’s covenantal love and grace by reflecting that love and grace and joy through our whole being – our actions as well as our words.

As Dr. McDonald says, election is all about “*furthering God’s purpose of blessing beyond the elect community*”. As God’s elect “image bearers” God has equipped us to do that.

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**Dr. Victoria Pedrick, Ruling Elder, Georgetown Presbyterian Church**

A thought I've cherished from Suzanne's address is that election is "God's answer to sin" and in a very real sense, is God's calling us to be "honest and real about ourselves," about our broken and rebellious nature. Election is not a special ticket to paradise or a pass into the best section of the stadium of life, but a call by the Holy Spirit to recognize and accept God's work for ourselves just as and where we are.

I continue to ponder as well the particular emphasis Suzanne placed upon the Bible's movement from Israel as God's elect people, "unable to sustain their side of the relationship," to Jesus Christ, who fulfills the covenant for us, "representing us." I asked her about this at the convocation: what are we to make of God's promises, if we must accept that somehow Israel has been replaced or had its election set aside? Suzanne's answer was wise and mysterious, as I recollect: we know that God's promises are sure, so we need not accept such an image of God setting aside God's chosen people; but the Bible also tells us that Christ is the only way to salvation and God's kingdom on earth, so how God will finally fulfill all promises is something we cannot yet know. Her words led me to recognize a greater urgency in our prayer to our Father, "your kingdom come." I pray for God's kingdom because, surely, it is there that we will find all of God's promises truly and fully realized. When we try simply to parse God's covenants by our own human standards, we will always come up short in imagining God's bounty.

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## **Mr. Adrian Steel, Ruling Elder, Lewinsville Presbyterian Church**

In the Q&A period, Professor McDonald expanded upon a statement in her presentation that Christ's death achieved salvation for "whomever God intends to save". Acknowledging that only God knows who is intended to be saved, she said that the traditional view is that those who are saved are those who, through the gift of faith given to them in grace by God, believe in Jesus and put their trust in him. Professor McDonald recognized that the traditional view is at odds with a more universalist view, based on a perception of God as a broadly loving and caring God, that all humankind can be and is saved through Jesus' death and sacrifice. In response to that view, she said that she hopes that at the time of the final judgment God will act to ensure eternal salvation to all but that only God can and will know what will happen.

I believe that the universalist view more accurately reflects what was achieved by Jesus' death. Jesus restored humankind's relationship with God and overcame original sin and ensured through the grace of God that we all will receive eternal salvation without regard to what we do or do not do on Earth (including whether we believe in Jesus or not). To be sure, acceptance of the call to the vocation of being a Christian enables us to use the resources and gifts that we have been blessed with to live out God's will here on Earth in gratitude (rather than in the self-interest of earning merit) for the unmerited grace and love endowed upon us. But in my view, God elected (and elects) everyone to eternal salvation by his grace and love, and nothing that one does can earn or disqualify one from that eternal salvation.

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## **The Rev. Dr. Kerry Stoltzfus, Pastor Emeritus, Potomac Presbyterian Church**

Dr. McDonald said, “So, I can’t emphasize enough that in electing Abram and through him, Israel, God is NOT therefore giving up on everyone 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.”

With the word huddle I silently applauded but in rereading that paragraph I began to reflect on a rather different meaning of the word. Perhaps I am too much influenced by “March Madness,” the NCAA basketball tournament.

Yet the sports metaphor of a huddle may in fact bolster Dr. McDonald’s argument. In order to participate in a huddle you must first be chosen to be a member of the team. Let’s set aside for the moment that in sports you are chosen according to your talent and previous experience. Nevertheless once you find yourself in the huddle, perhaps rejoicing and even giving thanks for being included, it is not a place to stay. While in that setting you are encouraged by your team mates, strategy is planned, skills are called forth, dedication to the task is affirmed and you may even sing a brief affirmation of faith in your team.

Everything done in the huddle is for the “blessing” of what goes on in the playing of the game. We are not chosen to stay there but to go out as team mates for the sake of the game. We might even say that an unseen force draws the next generation to the team and a huddle and the blessing continues. Values of fairness, humility, beauty and even grace are the hallmarks of a game well played. Other players and even spectators may be influenced, even blessed. Therefore as Dr. McDonald says, “election is for the sake of furthering God’s purpose of blessing.

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**Mr. Matthew D. Taylor, Ruling Elder, Georgetown Presbyterian Church and Reformed  
Institute Company of Teachers**

I have to admire Suzanne McDonald for wading hip-deep into some of the most perilous waters of Calvinism and the Reformed theological tradition. Election, predestination, God's divine decree(s?) from all eternity—these are the weighty matters that have made us Presbyterians distinct and notorious. As an uneasy inheritor of Calvin myself, I found her reconfiguration of TULIP and her double use of the idea of representation salutary. Yet the Q&A time afterwards exposed that such a rearrangement of the pieces of Reformed theology does little to resolve that question that is the emotional faultline of all Calvinist reflection: Why would God choose, and seemingly save, some people and not others?

By way of response, I would like to pick up one thread that was implicit in much of Dr. McDonald's presentation and make it a bit more explicit. Put simply, our emotional peace with the whole complex of theology called election rests entirely on the character and nature of God. If the God we worship is an arbitrary, neutral will eternally existing in ineffable capriciousness—choosing and loving some, damning others, casting benighted heathens and non-Presbyterians into eternal hellfire—then Reformed theology truly is a terrifying endeavor of logically defending a morally unjustifiable God. But if the God we worship is God the Father of Jesus Christ, the one who lived and died to redeem humans and all creation, then we can rest on the mercy and justice of God. The bottom line for me is that the God revealed in Jesus is more merciful than I could ever be, more loving than I could ever be, more kind, more patient, more gentle than I could ever be. I can trust that God to deal with myself and everyone else with an eternal generosity I cannot fathom. That God is worthy of my worship and not my horror. And that God is worthy of being re-presented to outsiders.

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**Ms. Ann Timmons, Old Presbyterian Meeting House, Playwright, Author of *Becoming Calvin***

I so enjoyed Suzanne McDonald's Reformed Institute Convocation lecture "Election Again?" In her supremely entertaining style Dr. McDonald dealt with an issue many of us find so problematic we would rather not think about it. She succeeded in the near-impossible; clarifying for her audience not only what scripture says election is, but how we can live out this definition, separately and together as a community of faith. I found her insistence that election never was meant to be "*reduced* to a way of accounting for personal salvation" liberating and enlarging. I was particularly struck when she said the "primary reason why God elects a people for himself is to further his wider purposes of blessing *beyond the elect community itself.*"

All this flies in the face of what many think of when they picture The Elect. But rather than being a tool for putting The Chosen Few on a higher plane than the non-elect, God uses those who are "in Christ" (i.e. of The Elect) to bring others into that community. We are all sinful and broken, but God chooses us, the faithful, to represent God to others and others to God. "Election has always been 'for' the other," Dr. McDonald asserts—and reasserts "It isn't all about us, folks!" We are called to show God's face to the world outside our churches, while also reflecting the face of that world back to God. We are conduits for God's grace, even as we mediate on behalf of that world before God. I find this speaks directly to our sense of mission, of purpose, a mandate to be even more in the world, and never *ever* think that, because we may have been chosen, that somehow we are separate. We must be very much *in* the world to do God's work.

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## **Mr. Paul Wackerbarth, Ruling Elder, Knox Presbyterian Church**

I thought Dr. McDonald's very clear, coherent and accessible presentation was outstanding. It helped me much better understand a topic I would flee from because it is so difficult to grasp. I knew election was in the Bible, but I scantily heard much mention of it in the Reformed or Presbyterian Churches I have been a part of over the course of my whole life. Asked about it, I took refuge in Karl Barth's concept that our hope is that God seeks a relationship with all humanity. Even so, I couldn't say much about how people would attain Barth's ideal.

Dr. McDonald's thoughtful talk presented election in a way I found easy to understand. I was familiar with the calling of Abraham in Genesis 12 as my Bethel Bible courses use that chapter as the basis of its biblical overview. That is that Abraham was told he would become the father of a great nation and through that nation all the nations of the world would be blessed. Bethel's motto "Blessed to be a Blessing" can easily be understood in terms of Dr. McDonald's assertion that we are called to bear witness to the blessing we have received in a way so as to enable the Holy Spirit to extend that blessing to others. I particularly like this concept because it assigns to us as the Church - clergy and laity alike - the active role of bearing witness to God's love. This helps to enable the Holy Spirit to advance God's blessing of salvation through Jesus Christ to others and toward the ideal stated by Barth.

I can think of a couple of tangible examples of bearing witness to our blessing happening in our church (Knox Presbyterian). For example, a casual conversation about the Heifer Project led to a discussion with an employee at our gym in which he described how several months earlier he somehow felt called to seek the Christian faith. He said he was trying to figure out how to go about this. He accepted our invitation to join our Wednesday Bible Study, becoming an enthusiastic participant. Our sessions became quite lively as through his questions we nurtured the growth of his faith as well as our own.

Also, after years of prayer and creative outreach to the families of the subsidized garden apartment complex across the street from our church, about 5-6 years ago a gaggle of about 20 children started wandering into our building. In the first instance, this was disruptive as the kids didn't know how to behave. However, two of our members lovingly took the kids under their wings and over time the whole congregation has embraced them. Among other things, they have learned the Kids Catechism and from time-to-time have recited it along with adults at our worship services.

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**Dr. Ann B. White, Ruling Elder, National Presbyterian Church and Reformed Institute  
Company of Teachers**

“Yes, we are the elect community in Christ ....” Suzanne McDonald tries to take the sting out of the doctrine of election by putting the word “elect” in biblical context, Abram to Jesus. Her effort doesn’t succeed. Election connotes classification, division into groups -- one group of people destined for one purpose, another group for another purpose. Changing context doesn’t remove the original meaning or its sting.

That sting comes from human efforts to deal with a matter that belongs solely to God. God is the classifier, the divider-into-groups, and God hasn’t explained the classifying to us. God’s mind with respect to the matter belongs to what Martin Luther calls the “hidden God” (*deus absconditus*), the aspects of God that are not revealed to us. Election is an “awe-inspiring secret” of this hidden God, says Luther, not to be inquired into by us. Nonetheless, we inquire and inquire again; we become frightened or combative about the subject, as Dr. McDonald notes. None of our fussing resolves -- or can resolve -- the problem, which is God’s alone.

Dr. McDonald ends with Christ, who is “God revealed” to us (Luther’s *deus revelatus*). We can focus on Christ. We can trust God’s self-revelation in Christ. We can say we belong to Christ and to his church – and leave it at that. To say “we’re the elect community” is to venture beyond our purview.

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