

Reply from Dr. Suzanne McDonald
Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology, Western Theological Seminary

Greetings, everyone! It was such a delight to be with you all for the Convocation earlier this month! Thank you for the terrific conversation we were able to start then, and it's wonderful to continue the conversation in this way too! I'm honored by how richly you have engaged with what I presented.

Many of the responses touch on the extent of salvation, and especially the issue of universalism, either for or against, so I have decided to begin with the words of one of my theology professors at Cambridge: 'If you haven't felt the tug of universalism, then I wonder if you have really heard the gospel.' He wasn't (and isn't) a universalist, but his point was that we should all want everyone to come to know Christ and the hope that we have in him, and we should never assume that anyone we meet could never be saved. He then went on to explain the difference between 'Christian dogmatic universalism' (the assertion that everyone *will* be saved, in and through Christ) and 'Christian hopeful universalism' (the *hope* that all *might* be saved, in and through Christ).

Our Reformed tradition has long been very attracted to universalism. As some of the responses point out, the alternative in our tradition (some form of double predestination) is so difficult, in what it might suggest about the character of God and in other ways, that we have long sought other ways of construing election. There were universalist strands within our tradition as early as the 17th century. Schleiermacher in the 19th century advocated a 'dogmatic universalist' position, and the logic of Karl Barth's theology pushes very, very strongly in that direction, although he refused to take that step. Today, one of the foremost advocates for dogmatic universalism, Thomas Talbot, also comes at the issues from a Reformed perspective.

Personally, I can't accept 'dogmatic universalism' because I am not persuaded that scripture allows us to. There are a very small number of texts in the New Testament, the meaning of each of which is highly disputed by biblical scholars, that *might* open the door to the possibility that all people will be saved. However, there are many, many more texts that seem to suggest that some will find themselves separated from eternal life with God. This is hard to hear, but difficult to avoid (as is the uncomfortable tension between the passages that pull us in each of these directions, as another of the responses indicated). For me, it seems much harder to make a scripturally-based theological case for dogmatic universalism than it is to make a scripturally-based theological case for the salvation of some, but not all.

I am prepared to live in an ambiguous place on this, though. I am not going to slam the door shut if scripture seems to keep it open, so I will not deny that universal salvation may be a possibility. But the way I see it, that door is possibly just ajar, so neither am I prepared to say that it is wide open. I can't say anything more than that there *may* be enough in scripture to hold out the *possibility* that all *might* be saved in Christ, while recognizing that this may very well not be the case. I'm willing to live in that tension, but I also understand why others don't think that is appropriate, and for very good reasons. For some, as we've seen in the responses, it is impossible to conceive of how the God made known in Jesus Christ could choose not to save all in the end, and for others, it is equally impossible to conceive of how all could be saved, given the implications of the scriptural witness.

Leaving this question open also means that neither am I shutting the door to that most difficult of alternatives to universal salvation, which is some form of double predestination (yes, the dreaded 'P' word!). While we can speak of those who are not saved freely doing what they most want to do, even as that leads them away from God, the Reformed bottom line remains that no one could turn to God

unless God enabled them (which, as one of the responses pointed out, is deeply contrary to our culture's emphasis on worthiness and self-determination). Again, there is no easy resolution to this, scripturally or (theo)logically. More than any human attempt to resolve how this will all unfold in the end, though, we can be 100% certain that God will be utterly faithful to who he has revealed himself to be, especially in Jesus Christ. God may well surprise all of us in how he works all of this out, but as one of the responses pointed out, we can rest in the mercy and justice of God as he has made himself known in Jesus, and trust him to act with the fullness of generosity shown in Jesus.

In the meanwhile some responses rightly touched on issues like whether we even have the right to designate ourselves as the 'elect community', and who belongs in that community. I think that it is scripturally accurate to speak of the church as the elect community, but we have to be *very* careful of how we interpret what that entails, for us and for others. It seems to me that scripture indicates that one of the ways that God has chosen to fulfill his purposes is to set apart a distinct community in a particular covenant relationship with him. So, in electing Israel, God is setting apart one people, through whom he works out his purposes, both for them and for the rest of the world (and as one of the responses pointed out, God's electing is also a source of assurance for them in difficult times, and the NT sees predestination very much in this way too). While it needs to be said with care, what we find in the NT is that the elect community is re-configured around Christ. This means that there is still a particular covenant people, and we still have scriptural criteria which enable us to name that people as the elect community, but now, rather than ethnicity / works of the law etc, the basis of membership is being 'in Christ' by the Spirit, through faith. I think it helps to bear in mind, though, that in the OT, it is scripturally accurate to say *both* that Israel was God's elect people, *and also* that those outside of the people of Israel were not necessarily lost (and for that matter, the OT also indicates that not every single Israelite would necessarily be saved). I think it is also scripturally accurate to say that the visible church is God's elect people in Christ, but with similar caveats. This is one of the reasons why our earlier Reformed tradition explores the distinction between the visible and the invisible church. It did that negatively (the idea that not necessarily everyone who 'goes to church' is going to be saved... but this needs to be handled with greater care than some of our forebears used. *No one* has the right to pronounce on the validity or otherwise of someone's faith in terms of their eternal destiny. That is God's job, and no one else's - thank God!). But our tradition also explores this visible / invisible church distinction more positively - the idea that there are plenty of people not currently in the visible church who may well be saved in the end.

So we need to be careful about what we are and are not claiming when we say that the church is the elect community. It seems as though one of the main reasons there is a set-apart elect community is the role that this community is called to play in the unfolding of God's purposes. The elect community remains distinct and identifiable because of its particular covenant relationship to God, and by virtue of that, its particular relationship to the rest of the world, and it's this two-fold relationship that means it is able to fulfill the purposes God intends through election. (Incidentally, as one of the responses points out, this means I don't buy into the binaries in a lot of recent debates about election - that is *either* about salvation *or* about function, or that it is *either* about individuals *or* it is corporate. In scripture it is clearly *all* of those things).

All of this means that while Karl Barth, for example, did an absolutely monumental job of articulating how it could be that every single human being is elect in Christ, whether or not they have faith, many of us (me very much included) struggle to see how this can stand up scripturally. One reason is that both the OT & NT are clear that the elect community does not include everyone. Part of the reason for that is the role the elect community is called to play, as I mentioned above. Another reason why I can't go with

Barth on this is that for the Pauline epistles, where these issues are most fully articulated, to be a member of the elect community and to be 'in Christ' are equivalent terms, and to be 'in Christ' is not presented as the reality for every single person. NT scholar James Dunn put it very bluntly, but, I think, very accurately, and very possibly with Barth in mind: "Paul did not think of all men and women as willy-nilly 'in Christ' whether they want to be or not, whether they know or not." Union with Christ is by the Spirit, through faith. This is a gift, not a 'work' that we do to 'earn' our standing before God, but this is also something that is not (yet...?) the case for all.

It is also very important to be reminded of what the church as the elect community is set apart to be and to do - the kind of missional, active calling in and for the world that many of the responses emphasized. As one of the responses pointed out, election is about service as well as salvation. This more fully rounded biblical understanding of election is indeed *very* counter-cultural, in relation to American individualism and also to American exceptionalism. Election being primarily about 'us' as the 'holy huddle' of the 'saved' vs 'them' (everyone else, who is less important to God) has shaped aspects of our history, and still informs aspects of our national self-perception. The positive sports-analogy way of thinking about a huddle is *very* helpful, though! I will definitely have to stop being entirely negative about huddles :) !! In addition to an unwarranted 'superiority complex', unhelpful ways of thinking about election also lead to exactly the complacency that another of the responses points out in relation to perseverance / preservation. I find the idea of 'habits' helpful in this regard (following the 17th century Reformed theologian, John Owen, who was in turn following Aquinas). We are to strive, by the inspiration and power of the Spirit, to cultivate habits in our lives that further our conformity to Christ, even though imperfectly. This is hard, lifelong work, and it is expected of us. Those who are not seeking to do this are forming habits that will continue to take them further and further away from Christ. To finish on a positive note, though, 'blessed to be a blessing' really is fundamental to election in scripture (it was wonderful to read some specific examples of the fruits of this!). This is where ideas related to the *imago dei* are helpful, as one of the responses pointed out. For me, the two-fold representational dynamic that I associate with the *imago dei* helps to keep the emphasis where it belongs: on the privilege of our calling to serve as God's instruments for others.