

## ELECTION, THE HUMANITY OF JESUS, AND POSSIBLE WORLDS

Robert R. Hann\*

"He chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4).

Even Reformed Christians appear to have become uncomfortable with the doctrine of election. Indeed, election seems to have become an endangered species of doctrine. Its habitat, which once included the entire Presbyterian and Reformed continent, has shrunk so that it now seems to thrive only in small preserves labeled "Orthodox Presbyterian" and "Christian Reformed."

Two objections seem to have defeated the doctrine as it commonly has been understood. First, for God to have chosen some for special treatment seems contrary to what we have come to think of as "fair play." In the civic realm fairness seems to require giving each person an equal chance to succeed. It seems somehow more just that God too would give everyone the same chance. Surely, if I am to be an Equal Opportunity employer, Christ must be an Equal Opportunity Savior. The idea that some are chosen does not conform to what Thomas Kuhn would call our "paradigm." In terms of the sociology of knowledge, we have become Arminians all.<sup>1</sup> This objection, however, has only a limited weight. Sociology-of-knowledge considerations, as has been pointed out both sociologically and philosophically,<sup>2</sup> only incline us to consider concepts more or less plausible. They cannot tell us whether a given proposition is true.

A second objection, however, is more properly theological and thus deserving of our attention. Especially as the doctrine came to be elaborated by successive generations of theologians, election came increasingly to be discussed in terms of God's decrees before creation, and the fates of both the saved and the lost were thought to be equally the direct outcome of the will of God.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the doctrine that Charles Williams called "comprehensible in Calvin" became, in his words, "tiresome in English Puritans, and quite horrible" in later Pres-

\*Robert Hann is associate professor of religious studies at Florida International University in Miami.

<sup>1</sup>Popular civil religion, which holds that "God helps those who help themselves," is in fact Pelagian. Arminius believed in the necessity of grace; it was Pelagius who thought that we can cooperate with God and so merit our salvation.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. P. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969) 179-185; A. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality* (ed. A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1983) esp. p. 77.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. the Westminster Confession's statement: "God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass. . . . By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestined unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death" (3.1, 3).

byterians.<sup>4</sup> It is little wonder that for many even of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches the doctrine of election seemed more and more to be an exercise in theological abstraction and less and less an expression of grace.

A more satisfactory approach to election is found in the earlier Reformed confessions. One example is the Second Helvetic Confession of 1566, which quotes Eph 1:4 and firmly connects election not to God's decrees nor to reprobation but to Christ: "God has elected us, not directly, but in Christ, and on account of Christ. . . . Let Christ, therefore, be the looking glass, in whom we may contemplate our predestination" (chap. 9). In contrast to later scholasticism the earlier Reformed creeds understand election in terms of Christ<sup>5</sup> and locate it firmly within the workings of the gospel.<sup>6</sup> Election, in their view, is not an arcane side issue to Christian theology but an essential part of the way salvation is applied to the believer. As Jack Rogers has written: "Election is the Reformed way of saying grace alone."<sup>7</sup>

The perspective of the early Reformed creeds is in accord with the teaching of the NT. Throughout the NT, election is related to Christ. We are blessed in Christ, "even as he chose us in him," and we are destined in love "to be his sons through Jesus Christ" (Eph 1:3-5), "chosen and destined by God the Father . . . for obedience to Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 1:2), "predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brethren" (Rom 8:28). In the NT there are no eternal decrees apart from Christ: We are elect in him.

An essential component of the NT's view of election is that Christ is himself the Elect One. He is the "living stone . . . chosen and precious" (1 Pet 2:4). In Luke's transfiguration scene the heavenly voice speaks: "This is my Son, the Chosen" (9:35).<sup>8</sup> Even Jesus' opponents associate his messianic claims with election: "Let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One"

<sup>4</sup>C. Williams, *The Descent of the Dove: The History of the Holy Spirit in the Church* (New York: Meridian, 1956) 191. H. Berkhof (*Christian Faith* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979] 480) has written: "When election is made into an isolated subject, is one-sidedly applied to the individual and his eternal destiny, and no longer is confessed but intellectually analyzed, it evokes a series of questions that are absolutely unanswerable, because they are out of the (covenant) order."

<sup>5</sup>Cf. the Scots Confession: "That same eternal God and Father, who by grace alone chose us in his Son Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world was laid, appointed him to be our head, our brother, our pastor, and the great bishop of our souls" (chap. 8).

<sup>6</sup>Cf. the Canons of Dort: "The elect in due time, though in various degrees and in different measures, attain the assurance of this their eternal and unchangeable election, not by inquisitively prying into the secret and deep things of God, but by observing in themselves with a spiritual joy and holy pleasure the infallible fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God—such as, a true faith in Christ, a godly sorrow for sin, a hungering and thirsting after righteousness, etc." (Article 1:12).

<sup>7</sup>J. Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 88.

<sup>8</sup>Following the preferred text. Some MSS read "beloved" by assimilation to the parallels in Mark 9:7; Matt 17:5. See B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1975) 148.

(23:35).<sup>9</sup> The election of believers is thus closely connected with Jesus' own election: He is the Chosen One, and it is in him that we are chosen. He was the first chosen, to become "the firstborn among many brethren." Our election is dependent upon his. Thus (whatever we may make of his development of the doctrine) Karl Barth's emphasis is correct: The election of believers cannot be considered apart from the election of Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup>

In view of the incarnation, moreover, the election of Jesus must include his election as a human being. Jesus' humanity must be continually asserted in the face of popular docetism.<sup>11</sup> Robert Farrar Capon has written: "The human race is, was, and probably always will be deeply unwilling to accept a human messiah. We don't want to be saved in our humanity; we want to be fished out of it."<sup>12</sup> But of course the Christian doctrine is that the humanity of Jesus is essential to our salvation. The Belgic Confession states:

[He] did not only assume human nature as to the body, but also a true human soul, that he might be a real man. For since the soul was lost as well as the body, it was necessary that he should take both upon him, to save both" (Article 18).

The election of Christ is not only the election of the divine Son but also the election of the man Jesus, and it may be that the election of Jesus in his humanity may be the most useful mirror, to use the metaphor of the Second Helvetic Confession, in which our own election may be viewed.

Within the framework of his humanity the temptations of Jesus are of particular interest. The temptation narratives (Matt 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13) follow the synoptic gospels' story of Jesus' baptism. It was at his baptism that Jesus' election was publicly announced by God: "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."<sup>13</sup> In the temptations that followed,

<sup>9</sup>Connecting messiahship with election has roots that extend back to the beginnings of the Hebrew monarchy. In its earliest usage *mēšīah Yahweh*, the Lord's anointed, was the king whom God had chosen. The paradigmatic case was of course that of David: Of the chosen son of Jesse the Lord speaks to Samuel, "Arise, anoint him, for this is he" (1 Sam 16:12). In Biblical usage, election and anointing are closely connected terms. It is because one has been chosen that he may be anointed.

<sup>10</sup>O. Weber (*Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953] 96) summarizes Barth succinctly: "If, according to Eph. 1:4, we are elected 'in him,' then the meaning is that we are elected 'in his person, in his will,' and moreover, 'in and with his being elected'."

<sup>11</sup>Docetism was an early Christian heresy that held that Jesus' apparent humanity was an illusion. According to the docetists the divine Son of God would have been contaminated if he had actually taken a human body, so he merely appeared to do so (the Greek term *dokeō* means "to seem").

<sup>12</sup>R. F. Capon, *Hunting the Divine Fox: An Introduction to the Language of Theology* (Minneapolis: Seabury, 1985) 91.

<sup>13</sup>So Mark 1:11; Luke 4:22; Matt 3:17 has the quotation in the third person: "This is my beloved Son." *Ho agapētos*, "the beloved," denotes a special status and may be rendered "the only-beloved." The heavenly voice in Luke's transfiguration narrative (9:35) calls Jesus *ho eklelegmenos*, "he who was chosen" (cf. n. 9 above); the other synoptics read *ho agapētos*. In the synoptic tradition, therefore, "chosen" and "beloved" are synonymous terms. In his baptism Jesus is presented as God's chosen Son. This point was seen clearly by the scribes who made the Johannine parallel read: "I have seen and borne witness that this is the Chosen Son of God" (John 1:34, according to several MSS [cf. Metzger, *Textual Commentary* 200]).

Jesus faced the possibility of denying his election and of forsaking the work for which he was chosen. We must, moreover, be warned against a false understanding of Jesus' temptations, which may not be understood in ways that undercut Jesus' humanity or that reduce them to a series of charades. It is docetic to minimize the stark reality of what the NT says about the temptations: They were lengthy, they were physically exhausting, and, when they were over, Jesus was drained beyond the possibility of human assistance: "Then the devil left him, and, behold, angels came and ministered to him" (Matt 4:11).

Among Jesus' temptations was the temptation to use divine power to eliminate the necessity of his physical suffering: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."<sup>14</sup> It must also have been that Jesus was tempted to use that power to escape from the ordeal of the temptations themselves. The testing ended when Jesus said, "Begone, Satan!" (4:10). Surely he had been tempted to escape the terrible experience by pronouncing these words forty days earlier when the temptations had just begun. Yet to have done so would have been to succumb to as surely as to have yielded to one of the temptations that the gospels record.<sup>15</sup>

If to call upon divine power to resist the temptations would itself have been to succumb, then we are faced with an awesome and necessary conclusion: It was possible for Jesus to have yielded to the temptations and so to have forsaken his mission. Here our response is likely to be: "So it may have been possible, but only humanly speaking." But this is just the point: When speaking Biblically about the temptations of Jesus, "humanly" is the only way that we can speak. Speaking of Jesus' withstanding the temptations because he was the Son of God has already been ruled out by 4:3-4. The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted, and God's angels ministered to him when it was all over. But in the time between, Jesus the man had no other resources than we have when we ourselves are tempted.<sup>16</sup> There could have been no heavenly lifeline to snatch Jesus to safety in a moment of weakness, and he must have known the terrible possibility that he could have succumbed.<sup>17</sup> This may be why the temptations remained so vividly in Jesus' mind as to become part of

<sup>14</sup>O. Cullmann (*The Christology of the New Testament* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963] 276-277) has written: "The temptation story, which comes immediately after that of the baptism, sets Jesus even more radically apart from all Hellenistic 'sons of gods'. . . . We have seen that Satan attempts to force upon Jesus a political messianic role which would prevent his suffering. . . . It is highly significant that Jesus rejects as satanic also the suggested 'Hellenistic' conception of his divine sonship in the sense of miraculous powers."

<sup>15</sup>It is not necessary to the point but perhaps nevertheless of interest to recall that the gospels each summarize a forty-day period of testing in less than a page. More things must have happened than we are told.

<sup>16</sup>This seems to be a necessary implication of Heb 4:15 as well. All this is not to say that no help was available to Jesus. God's help was no doubt as available to him as it is to us (1 Cor 10:13), but that help must have been under the order of grace and not from Jesus' status as Son of God.

<sup>17</sup>Berkhof (*Christian Faith* 297) writes: "A whole world tried to pull him away from his calling. Could he have succumbed to that? In retrospect, in the light of the resurrection, this question may be answered in the negative. But Jesus did not know that in advance and he felt the full impact of the opposing forces. He had no idea of his sinlessness on which he, encouraged by it, could fall back."

his reminiscences to his disciples. It must have been, until Good Friday, the most terrible experience of his life.

Must we then portray God the Father as anxiously watching the events of the temptation, biting his heavenly nails as he waited to see the conclusion? Did he have a list of potential appointees for messiahship and sonship for use in case this Jesus failed? It cannot be that God was uncertain about the outcome: Jesus' election, like ours, was "according to the foreknowledge of God the Father" (1 Pet 1:2).<sup>18</sup> But how are these to be reconciled? Some would claim that there seem to be only two ways along which we can proceed. The first is to deny the reality of the temptations and leads, as we have seen, to docetism. The second is to deny God's certainty of the outcome and leads to the rejection of his omniscience.

But a third and better way of approaching the problem of election and the temptations of Jesus is suggested by Alvin Plantinga's fruitful idea of "possible worlds."<sup>19</sup> According to this concept, the way things are in the world that we inhabit is not the only way things might have been. In Plantinga's view there are other states of affairs that might actually have existed instead of those with which we are familiar. These states of affairs, together with the actual world we know, are called possible worlds. Some of them differ only slightly from our world, while others may be very different indeed. There are possible worlds in which Socrates was not wise but foolish; there are possible worlds in which I am, say, not a professor but a policeman, possible worlds in which I am not married but single, possible worlds in which I do not exist at all.

If in Plantinga's view there are possible worlds in which Socrates was foolish, then there are possible worlds in which Jesus did not successfully resist the temptations.<sup>20</sup> Both in such possible worlds and in our world, Jesus' temptations were real and he was not constrained either to resist or to succumb. The only necessary difference between these worlds and ours is that in our world Jesus did not yield to the temptations. In thinking of none of these worlds is it necessary to eliminate the possibility of Jesus' failure.<sup>21</sup>

How then may we speak of the temptations without having at the same time to portray God as uncertain about the outcome? There are possible worlds in which Socrates was wise or foolish or nonexistent, worlds in which Jesus withstood the temptations or yielded or, perhaps, was never born at all. God

<sup>18</sup>*KJV*, which follows the Greek *eklektōis . . . kata prognōsin theou patros* more closely than the *RSV*'s "chosen and destined by God the Father." Jesus' career fulfilled "the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:24).

<sup>19</sup>Plantinga briefly describes his view of possible worlds in his "Self-Profile," which forms part of *Alvin Plantinga* (ed. J. E. Tomberlin and P. van Inwagen; Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985) 88–91. A full discussion is found in Plantinga's *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974) esp. chaps. 4–8.

<sup>20</sup>Speculation beyond this point is probably not useful. What God would have done in the possible world in which Jesus had abandoned his mission cannot be known to us in this world. The Scriptures are part of this world and do not address what might have been if this world had been greatly different.

<sup>21</sup>Plantinga has noted that in possible worlds that differ with respect to what I do at a particular moment their histories may be indistinguishable up to that moment ("Alvin Plantinga—Replies" in *Alvin Plantinga* 384–385).

could have chosen to make any of these possible states of affairs real. But ours is the real world because, out of all the possible worlds, God chose to actualize this one. Of all the possible worlds of which God could conceive, this is the world of which God was thinking when he said, "Let there be!"<sup>22</sup>

It is to be noted that, in actualizing a possible world, none of the characteristics of that world are changed. In becoming actualized these characteristics become the way things are instead of the way things are not, but the characteristics themselves remain the same. Thus in the actualizing of the possible world in which Jesus could have succumbed to the temptations but did not, the "could have succumbed" does not disappear. If it was possible that Jesus withstood the temptations freely and not of divine necessity, then in actualizing that possibility the freedom of Jesus' decisions and deeds was not taken away.<sup>23</sup>

We may now return to the matter of Jesus' election. We have seen that, in order for his election to be fulfilled, Jesus must have willed to resist his temptations. In other ways as well the election of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God did not eliminate the importance of human decisions and deeds. Viewed "from below," the success of Jesus' mission appears to be contingent upon a number of events that might have occurred differently. Of course Jesus must have continued to be committed to his mission and to affirm "not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42). But the actions of others were also necessary to the mission of Jesus. Mary had to be willing to fulfill her unique role (1:28-38); Jesus' family environment had to be conducive to his spiritual growth (2:52); as Luke especially points out, even the right political setting had to be present. Had any of these human facts been different, Jesus could not have accomplished what God chose him to do.

The concept of possible worlds sheds light on the historical process by means of which Jesus' fulfillment of his mission was made possible. It is clear that there is no possible world in which Jesus could have fulfilled his mission if he had not actually been born.<sup>24</sup> In a similar way, any possible world in which Jesus fulfilled his mission must also have included the means by which Jesus became the person by whom that mission could have been fulfilled. It is perhaps

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Barth's interpretation of Gen 1:2: "That which is not is that which God as creator did not elect or will, that which as Creator He passed over, that which according to the account in Genesis 1:2 He set behind him as chaos, not giving it existence or being" (K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3.3 [Naperville: Allenson, 1961] 73).

<sup>23</sup>There may be yet another possible world  $x$  in which Jesus could not have failed. In that world, however, Jesus would have been not human but an automaton. By actualizing the possible world  $w$  in which Jesus could have failed but does not, God does not make that world into  $x$ , which remains a discarded possibility. In our world, as the gospels make clear, it was possible for Jesus to succumb.

<sup>24</sup>Could there have been a possible world in which a docetic Jesus fulfilled his mission without having been born? P. van Inwagen ("Plantinga on Trans-World Identity" in *Alvin Plantinga* 115-116) gives some attention to the matter of "trans-world identity" in Plantinga's thought: whether there could be a possible world in which Socrates is not human but an alligator. It seems to be necessary that there be sufficient shared characteristics between "Socrates" in world  $a$  and "Socrates" in world  $b$  so as to allow a trans-world traveler to identify both as the same. Presumably the foolish Socrates looked the same, had the same parents, etc., as the Socrates we think of. He simply could not get his reasoning to work out right. A Jesus who had not been born would not, by this criterion, be the same being as the Jesus we know.

easy to conceive of a possible world in which Jesus' mother was named something other than "Mary." It is harder to conceive of a world in which she retarded her son's spiritual development. In stating the above we are obviously saying something akin to the Reformed doctrine of providence: "God, who has appointed to everything its end, has ordained the beginning and the means by which it reaches its goal" (Second Helvetic Confession, chap. 4). We have, however, avoided thinking of providence, like election in the later creeds, in the context of eternal decrees. Like the events surrounding his temptation, the decisions and deeds not only of Jesus but of others whose lives affected his mission were free: Each person could have acted differently. In choosing to actualize the possible world in which Jesus freely fulfilled his mission, God also chose the world in which a woman named Mary freely recognized her vocation in being Jesus' mother (Luke 1:46–49), the world in which an emperor freely decreed an enrollment for taxation (2:1), and the world, finally, in which a governor freely decreed the execution of a preacher whose teachings seemed to be politically dangerous (23:5).<sup>25</sup> As we have seen in the specific case of Jesus' temptations, the volitional nature of each of these acts was not eliminated when God chose to actualize this world.

We are now in a position to return to our initial question about the election of individuals. Reformed Christians have approached this issue with Eph 1:4 in mind: "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world." Non-Calvinists have approached the question thinking of passages like 1 Tim 2:3–4: "God . . . desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." To Calvinists, other Christians have seemed to compromise God's sovereignty and to enfeeble election by making it dependent on the will of human beings.<sup>26</sup> To the non-Reformed, the Calvinistic doctrine has seemed to deny the free offer of the gospel and to undercut evangelism.<sup>27</sup> Christians appear to be impaled on the horns of a dilemma.

We have seen in the preceding sections, however, a model for understanding the election of Jesus in which human choice is not denied but rather incorporated into the workings of election itself. We may now ask whether Plantinga's concept of possible worlds can be profitably applied to our own election. I think that it can be applied in the following way: There is at least one possible world in which I freely responded to the gospel and became a Christian, and there is at least one other possible world in which I remained an unbeliever. In each of

<sup>25</sup>Throughout the present discussion, freedom is understood as the ability to have chosen to act differently from the way one in fact did act. There is a possible world, of course, in which Mary impeded Jesus' mission, a world in which Augustus adopted a different fiscal policy, a world in which Herod executed Barabbas (Mark 15:6–15 and parallels). In each world including ours, each of these decisions and deeds was voluntary: None of these persons was compelled to choose as he or she did. See P. L. Quinn, "Plantinga on Foreknowledge and Freedom," in *Alvin Plantinga* 271–287.

<sup>26</sup>So the Canons of Dort, especially the rejection of errors appended to the first section.

<sup>27</sup>Non-Reformed Christians were particularly unimpressed by Calvin's argument that the "all men" of 1 Tim 2:4 means "men of all sorts." "God has not closed the way unto salvation to any order of men"; J. Calvin (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.24.16 [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960]). This interpretation actually originated with Augustine (*The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love* 113 [Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1961] 121): "We may understand by 'all men,' every sort of men."

these worlds various conditions contributed to my religious state. In the first world I was raised by a Christian parent, while in the second world my parents were unbelievers and mocked Christianity. In the first world my own experience of grace pointed me to God, while in the second world I interpreted my experiences solely within a secular frame of reference. In the first world the happiness of my marriage leads me to give thanks to God, while in the second world I only consider myself to be a very lucky man. In each world my state of belief or unbelief is the result of voluntary decisions and deeds by myself and others. Yet of all other possible worlds God chose to actualize the one in which I became a Christian. In choosing this world in which I and others believe, "he chose us in him before the foundation of the world." God's actualizing of the world in which these conditions occurred is thus, from a Christian perspective, an act of grace. The response of the Christian to the gospel, like the experience of Jesus in his temptations, is both free and certain: free, because it is unfettered; certain, because God in his grace has chosen this outcome from among all the other states of affairs that might have been.

How does this view accord with Scripture and with the Reformed creeds? Clearly, no one in the Biblical or Reformation periods was thinking in just these terms. The question we must ask, therefore, is not "Is this a necessary reading?" but "Is this permissible, and does seeing things in this way add to our understanding?" It does not seem that to understand election in terms of God's choice to actualize this world violates any of the key passages on election in the NT. It might be objected, however, that this concept does not do full justice to the Biblical teaching, and especially to the view that we are elect in Christ. In particular it may seem that this understanding speaks of the significance of Christ in our election primarily as an historical precedent: Our election operates in the same way his did. In reply it may be said, first, that it may be of some value to include such a view in one's understanding of election. According to 1 Cor 15:23 Christ is the "firstfruits," who has demonstrated in his resurrection what will certainly be true of all believers. There may be some useful implications in a similar approach to his election as well. In addition, however, this paper does not attempt to offer a complete theory of election but only a Reformed perspective that may assist in constructing such a view. Not everything that must be covered in a comprehensive treatment needs to be discussed here.

We have spoken of God's choice to actualize this world as an act of grace. This perspective seems to accord with the early Reformed creeds, which as we have seen above saw election evangelically and Christologically: Election, in the early Reformed perspective, has to do with the application of grace and the gospel to believers. One might object, however, on the ground of the Canons of Dort. To say at the same time that our human acts are genuinely free and that the outcome of our decisions and deeds is known to God in advance may seem to resemble Arminianism too closely.<sup>28</sup>

By way of reply we may first observe that the objectionable feature in the

<sup>28</sup>Arminianism, the doctrine of the Remonstrants whose view was rejected by the synod of Dort in 1618–19, held that God's election of individuals was determined by his foreknowledge that they would voluntarily come to faith and persevere in it to the end.



Arminians' teaching was not merely their idea that foreknowledge is the key to election. The critical issue was their view of what that foreknowledge concerned. The teaching rejected at Dort was that election is determined by God's foreknowledge of the believer's merit, of his or her "perseverance to the end in faith, conversion, holiness, and godliness . . . for the sake of which he who is chosen is more worthy than he who is not chosen" (Canons of Dort, Section 1, Rejection of Errors 5). Contrary to the Reformed doctrine that faith and conversion are God's gifts that flow to believers on account of grace, the Remonstrants taught that faith and conversion are meritorious activities that move God in his foreknowledge to include those who display them among the elect.<sup>29</sup>

There is nothing of the foregoing in the concept being proposed in this paper. In choosing to actualize this world, God brought about the election of those who would be believers, choosing them "in him before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4). It is not the case that the eventual belief and conversion of the elect is meritorious. Indeed, as we have already seen, my believing—while free on my own part—is at the same time an outcome of free acts by others. In choosing the world in which I became a believer, God also chose the world in which those conditions occurred that would lead me to faith. As we have seen above, God's actualizing of the world in which these conditions occurred is an act of grace. Such grace, therefore, is always prevenient. The response of the Christian, although free, is secure, because God in his grace has chosen to actualize the world in which this response occurs.

This paper began by acknowledging that the views commonly understood as the Reformed doctrine of election were theologically troublesome because, especially as they spoke of God's eternal decrees and of reprobation, they seemed to have little to do with the gospel. Following the direction of the early Reformed creeds we have attempted to understand election in the light of the election of Jesus and especially in the light of his temptations. Confronted with the problem of reconciling Jesus' freedom and God's foreknowledge in connection with the temptations, we have made use of Alvin Plantinga's concept of possible worlds. We have found that this view allows us to affirm a Biblical and Reformed doctrine of election and at the same time to acknowledge the importance of human decisions and deeds. Finally we have seen that from this perspective God's choosing to actualize this world from among other possible worlds is nothing other than an act of grace. This grace, and not eternal decrees or reprobation, becomes election's most important characteristic. A view of election consistent with the opening section of this paper has been reached.

Thinking of election in terms of God's actualization of a possible world, however, has implications for further reflection within Reformed theology. Each of these flows from the recognition that God's actualizing this world is an act of grace. The first of these has to do with the corporate nature of election. In distinction from the individualistic emphasis found in popular evangelicalism, Reformed theology has always spoken of the communal nature of salvation.

<sup>29</sup>Arminianism is thus a return to the medieval principle: "To the one who does what is in him to do, God does not deny grace." In this view grace is necessary for salvation, but one can prepare for the gift of grace by becoming a worthy recipient of that gift. Cf. G. Tvard, *Justification: An Ecumenical Study* (New York: Paulist, 1983) 36–37.

We are Christians within a covenant community, the Church. "The Kirk is catholic, that is, universal, because it contains the chosen of all ages, realms, nations, and tongues" (Scots Confession, chap. 16). This is of course a Biblical perspective as well. Except for the election of Jesus and the selection of some persons to perform specific tasks,<sup>30</sup> the NT does not speak of the election of solitary individuals. It speaks instead of the election of the Christian community. References to elect persons are characteristically in the plural: "He chose us in him" (Eph 1:4).

In understanding election in terms of God's choice to actualize this possible world, moreover, there can be no question of my election as a solitary person. This is true in two ways. First, if I have been elected in God's choice of this world, then so have all others who will believe. It can never become a matter of God primarily having chosen me: My worship cannot consist primarily of singing "Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine."<sup>31</sup> In addition, my unfettered response to the gospel is dependent on the free acts of others, including other Christians. My response was shaped not only by my own volition but also, as we have seen, by the contributions of others. In actualizing the world in which I believe, God has also actualized the world in which those external factors—other persons, environmental influences, the Church—all existed as well. My election is thus doubly corporate: I am elected along with all others who will believe, and this election is made effective through the acts and decisions of others.<sup>32</sup>

A second implication of the concept of this paper has to do with the doctrine of creation and is related to one of the esoteric backwater issues of Reformed scholasticism: the controversy over infra- and supralapsarianism. This dispute concerned the relationship between creation and election: Did God decide to create a world of men and women, recognize that we would fall into sin, and then decide to elect some of those sinners to be saved (infralapsarianism)? Or did he elect some to be saved and then create the world as a means to that end (supralapsarianism)?

Supralapsarianism had implications that had little to do with the gospel

<sup>30</sup>The calling of the apostles is an instance of the latter: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit" (John 15:16). Paul writes of his election that "he . . . had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace" (Gal 1:15, echoing the call of the prophet in Isa 49:1).

<sup>31</sup>I. J. Hesselink (*On Being Reformed* [Ann Arbor: Servant, 1983] 29) has written: "What is objectionable about so many so-called gospel hymns is not only the cheap, jazzy music, but also the self-centered, Arminian theology. . . . You need not be a theologian to figure out when there is an unhealthy imbalance. Simply notice whether you sing more hymns about 'me and my salvation' or more hymns about God, his glory and grace, and his kingdom."

<sup>32</sup>Chief among these external means, in the Reformed view, is the Church. Calvin called the Church the mother of believers (*Institutes* 3.1.4) and introduced his discussion of the Church with these words: "It is by the faith in the Gospel that Christ becomes ours and we are made partakers of the salvation and eternal blessedness brought by him. Since, however, . . . we need outward helps to beget and increase faith within us, and advance it to its goal, God has also added these aids" (*ibid.*).

and that led to its rejection by many Reformed thinkers.<sup>33</sup> The initial insight of its adherents, however, is of the two the more consistent with the concept that God's choice to actualize this world was an act of grace. As we have seen above, God's actualizing the world in which I am a Christian included actualizing all the means by which I became a believer. I could not have become a believer had I not been born with enough intelligence to understand the gospel (Rom 10:17). Indeed I could not have become a believer had I not been born at all. Thus in order for me and others to have become believers, a vast number of physical things had to have occurred: Millions of years of evolution had to have taken place in order for sufficiently intelligent beings to have existed; the earth itself had to have been a suitable environment for life; the "big bang" had to have occurred. The whole of creation had to happen, and thus the whole process of creation must be recognized to be an act of God's grace. A positive Reformed approach to environmental issues, to offer just one suggestion, seems to be necessitated by this recognition. This implication is consistent with the proposal of this paper: Choosing to actualize this world is God's act by which election is established. In the present discussion, not only election but also creation is recognized as an outcome of God's actualizing. This becomes yet another way in which we may regard God's actualizing to be an act of his grace.

<sup>33</sup>Supralapsarianism led to a resurgence of the doctrine of double predestination. If, the supralapsarians thought, God created a world peopled in part of men and women he had not chosen, must it not be that these were decreed for damnation in a similar way as the elect were destined to be saved? Calvin himself had taught a doctrine of double predestination (*Institutes* 3.23.7). This concept, however, which Calvin called a "dreadful decree," does not have confessional status in the Reformed tradition except at Westminster (and is explicitly repudiated in the Canons of Dort [1.15]). The supralapsarian position seemed to the later theologians to be more consistent with Calvinism since it did not reduce election to a sort of after-the-fact rescue operation. But it also seemed to deny God's love: Did God create some people, having already decided that they were not among the elect? The earlier creeds presented a better Calvinism on this point than did the later theologians and Calvin himself.



#### Copyright and Use:

**As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.**

**No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.**

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

#### About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.