We come now in our discussion to a doctrinal area particularly associated with the Presbyterian tribe within the Reformed tradition, even though Martin Luther in *The Bondage of the Will* covered this territory thoroughly himself. But here it is: the topic of election and its cousin predestination, what Kirk Bottomly called “the skeleton in the Reformed closet.” The doctrine as debated in historical theology is a wide-ranging topic, often focusing on the tension between God’s sovereignty and human free will. The *Fellowship Theology Project* on election starts with the sad consequence of the fall: human beings actually lost their freedom of will and became incapable of turning toward God without the prior action of God to love them and graciously draw them (that is, elect or choose them) into his redeeming circle.

The deception in the Garden of Eden carries a lot of irony. Adam and Eve *thought* by choosing to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil that they would retain wisdom and make good choices in the future. But the opposite happened. By choosing to defy God at that moment, they lost true freedom to do good by becoming enslaved to sin (Paul’s language in Romans 7). Sin introduced entropy to the human system: the natural tendency toward chaos, unless an outside force is applied to bring order instead. God is that outside force, and only his gracious, merciful intervention can keep a sinner from spiraling out into spiritual outer space.

We see the effects of spiritual entropy early in the biblical narrative. Adam and Eve sin, and bam! Cain actually kills his brother Abel. Within five chapters, God is describing the state of humanity as “only evil all of the time.” But out of that darkest hour, God chooses Noah and safeguards his family’s life through the flood in order to bring humanity back in line with God’s purposes.

In Genesis 12:1-3, God for no *apparent* reason picks Abram and his wife Sarai to be the forebears of a nation God would establish for his glory. But even at this early stage, God makes clear that the reason for God’s election of the couple from Ur was not that they deserved it or earned it or were particularly righteous. The text is bare on that subject. No, God says, “I choose you. But it’s not about you; it’s about the great nation you will birth, through which all the world will be blessed.” This is where the Bible overview *The Bethel Series* gets its theme: “Blessed to be a blessing.”

Anyone who is chosen by God is chosen to be a blessing somehow. Think Moses (who tried very hard to say No), Samuel, Saul, David, and Mary (who gave a humble Yes).

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The list could go on, but the point is that salvation and service are God’s initiative tugging at the heart. People in our generation, too, are moved by the Holy Spirit to [simply] respond and receive the necessary power from God to carry out the commission, whatever it might be. “[God] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love” (Ephesians 1:4).

Stephen experienced this dynamic first-hand, as an adult convert to the Christian faith. His account:

“I used to picture the church as a huge room filled with people. Jesus was way up at the front; I could hardly see him. Everyone was facing forward and didn’t even know that I had slipped into the vacant seat in the back row. I was just one of thousands, faceless, nameless, and unknown. Certainly Jesus was too important to pay attention to me.

It is strange that I thought that way because it does not reflect my experience or theology. I had a clear sense of call when I was a college student. Frankly, I wasn’t interested in God. I had had enough of God when my family came apart. Even when a few religious friends set their sights on me, I wasn’t interested. I didn’t want to believe. And then despite my mindset and determined disbelief there was this internal tugging at my heart. I could sense something/someone outside of me calling within me. One day I didn’t want to believe and then one day I did.”

While the details for each of us may be different, the witness of scripture is that all believers are called, and called personally, by name. That’s what we see in the gospels: each disciple was called individually by Jesus. All who join the church thereafter are called as well.

Stephen continues: “The doctrine of election means that Jesus has a seat not at the back of the church, but right up front with my name on it. It is a seat of honor. He knows I am there. He came out and got me, took me by the hand and brought me right up front. The doctrines of predestination, election, and effectual calling mean that the church is Jesus’ church and every single one of us is there on his purpose. Not one of us there by chance or by accident.”

And so, as we engage in this study of Election, an essential tenet of the Reformed faith, let us rejoice that God calls us to himself, sends his Spirit to bring us along, invites our response, embraces us in safety, and sends us out to love people, care for the natural world, and represent his kingdom in a world longing to see its day. Our role in all this is a response to God who loved us first, with the understanding that salvation is never a human achievement, and blessing others is our way of serving God’s purposes. We will leave it to you in your DOORWAYS study or at the dinner table to discuss, “How could anyone say no to that?”

**GOT QUESTIONS?**

After completing the reading homework on the next page, what questions would you like to hear addressed during the class time? Write them here:

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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Day One: SPIRITUAL PARALYSIS; GOD’S CALL. Eph 2:1-3; Mk 4:12; Acts 28:26-28; Rom 3:10-20; Eph 1:3-5; II Tim 1:9-10; Eph 2:4; Joel 2:38-39</th>
<th>Day Two: GOD’S CHOICE OF US IN JESUS CHRIST. Matt 3:13-15; Jn 1:14; Mk 1:17; 2:14; Eph 1:11-14; Eph 1:17-18; I Cor 2:12</th>
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<td>Day Five: Scots, Ch. VIII (3.08); Westminster, Ch. XII/X (6.064–6.065); Declaratory Statement (6.192)</td>
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WARM-UP QUESTIONS BEFORE THE CLASS

1. Predestination, election and effectual calling have been hallmarks of Presbyterian/Reformed beliefs since the beginning. How familiar are you with these terms and the doctrines they represent?

2. When was the last time you heard a sermon or were in a class that taught them? Why do you think these doctrines have dropped (almost) out of sight for so many?

3. If you told a friend or a colleague that you believed in predestination and election, what kind of reaction do you think you’d get?

4. If these doctrines are so challenging and difficult, why do you think that the Reformers ever conceived and preached them?

I. SPIRITUAL PARALYSIS; GOD’S CALL

Scriptures:

Ephesians 2:1-3

Mark 4:12

Acts 28:26-28

Romans 3:10-20

Ephesians 1:3-5

II Timothy 1:9-10

Ephesians 2:4

Joel 2:28-29

Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms:

SECOND HELVETIC CONFESSION CHAPTER IX; Of Free Will, and Thus of Human Powers (BOC, 5.045)

MAN IS NOT CAPABLE OF GOOD, PER SE. In regard to goodness and virtue man’s reason does not judge rightly of itself concerning divine things. For the evangelical and apostolic Scripture requires regeneration of whoever among us wishes to be saved. Hence our first birth from Adam contributes nothing to our salvation. Paul says: “The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God,” etc. (I Cor. 2:14). And in another place he denies that we of ourselves are capable of thinking anything good (II Cor. 3:5). Now it is known that the mind or intellect is the guide of the will, and when the guide is blind, it is obvious how far the will reaches. Wherefore, man not yet regenerate has no free will for good, no strength to perform what is good. The Lord says in the Gospel: “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). And the apostle Paul says: “The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, indeed it cannot” (Rom. 8:7). Yet in regard to earthly things, fallen man is not entirely lacking in understanding.

SECOND HELVETIC CONFESSION, CHAPTER X; Of the Predestination of God and the Election of the Saints (BOC, 5.052)

GOD HAS ELECTED US OUT OF GRACE. From eternity God has freely, and of his mere grace, without any respect to men, predestinated or elected the saints whom he wills to save in Christ, according to the
saying of the apostle, “God chose us in him before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). And again: “Who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago, and now has manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus” (II Tim. 1:9 f.).

LARGER CATECHISM (BOC, 7.177)

Q67. What is effectual calling?
A. Effectual calling is the work of God's almighty power and grace, whereby (out of his free and especial love to his elect, and from nothing in them moving him thereunto) he doth in his accepted time invite and draw them to Jesus Christ, by his Word and Spirit; savingly enlightening their minds, renewing and powerfully determining their wills, so as they (although in themselves dead in sin) are hereby made willing and able, freely to answer his call, and to accept and embrace the grace offered and conveyed therein.

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH; Declaratory Statement (BOC, 6.192)

. . . concerning those who are saved in Christ, the doctrine of God's eternal decree is held in harmony with the doctrine of his love to all mankind, his gift of his Son to be the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, and his readiness to bestow his saving grace on all who seek it; that concerning those who perish, the doctrine of God's eternal decree is held in harmony with the doctrine that God desires not the death of any sinner, but has provided in Christ a salvation sufficient for all, adapted to all, and freely offered in the gospel to all; that men are fully responsible for their treatment of God's gracious offer; that his decree hinders no man from accepting that offer; and that no man is condemned except on the ground of his sin.

Essential Tenet

The call of God to the individual Christian is not merely an invitation that each person may accept or reject by his or her own free will. Having lost true freedom of will in the fall, we are incapable of turning toward God of our own volition. God chooses us for Himself in grace before the foundation of the world, not because of any merit on our part, but only because of His love and mercy.

1. Responding to the call of God is more than a matter of personal discretion.
2. Responding to God's call requires liberation from enslavement to sin.
3. God's choice precedes creation; it is not a reaction to human sin.
4. God's choice is based on God's grace, not on any human merit.

II. GOD'S CHOICE OF US IN JESUS CHRIST

Scriptures:

Matthew 3:13-15
John 1:14
Mark 1:17; 2:14
Ephesians 1:11-14
Ephesians 1:17-18
I Corinthians 2:12
Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms:

SCOTS CONFESSION, CHAPTER VIII; *Election* (BOC. 3.08 [a])

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. But since the opposition between the justice of God and our sins was such that no flesh by itself could or might have attained unto God, it behooved the Son of God to descend unto us and take himself a body of our body, flesh of our flesh, and bone of our bone, and so become the Mediator between God and man, giving power to as many as believe in him to be the sons of God; as he himself says, “I ascend to my Father and to your Father, to my God and to your God.” By this most holy brotherhood whatever we have lost in Adam is restored to us again. Therefore we are not afraid to call God our Father, not so much because he has created us, which we have in common with the reprobate, as because he has given unto us his only Son to be our brother, and given us grace to acknowledge and embrace him as our only Mediator. . . .

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH, CHAPTER XII; *Of Effectual Calling* (BOC, 6.064)

1. All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by his Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ: enlightening their minds, spiritually and savingly, to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them an heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and by his almighty power determining them to that which is good; and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ; yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace.

Essential Tenet

Each of us is chosen in Christ, who is eternally appointed to be head of the body of the elect, our brother and our high priest. He is the one who is bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, our divine Helper who is also our Bridegroom, sharing our human nature so that we may see His glory. We who receive Him and believe in His name do so not by our own will or wisdom, but because His glory compels us irresistibly to turn toward Him. By His enticing call on our lives, Jesus enlightens our minds, softens our hearts, and renews our wills, restoring the freedom that we lost in the fall.

III. THE SAVING POWER OF JESUS CHRIST

Scriptures:

Romans 3:21-26

Hebrews 10:19-22

Romans 8:1-4

Ephesians 3:11-12

Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms:

SCOTS CONFESSION, CHAPTER VIII; *Election* (BOC. 6.08 [b])

. . . . Further, it behooved the Messiah and Redeemer to be true God and true man, because he was able to undergo the punishment of our transgressions and to present himself in the presence of his Father’s judgment, as in our stead, to suffer for our transgression and disobedience, and by death to overcome him that was the author of death. But because the Godhead alone could not suffer death, and neither could manhood overcome death, he joined both together in one person, that the weakness of one should suffer and be subject to death—which we had deserved—and the infinite and invincible power of the
other, that is, of the Godhead, should triumph, and purchase for us life, liberty, and perpetual victory. So we confess, and most undoubtedly believe.

THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH, CHAPTER VIII; Of Christ the Mediator (BOC, 6.045–6.047)

3. The Lord Jesus in his human nature thus united to the divine, was sanctified and anointed with the Holy Spirit above measure; having in him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, in whom it pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell: to the end that being holy, harmless, undefiled, and full of grace and truth, he might be thoroughly furnished to execute the office of a Mediator and Surety. Which office he took not unto himself, but was thereunto called by his Father; who put all power and judgment into his hand, and gave him commandment to execute the same.

4. This office the Lord Jesus did most willingly undertake, which, that he might discharge, he was made under the law, and did perfectly fulfill it . . .

5. The Lord Jesus, by his perfect obedience and sacrifice of himself, which he through the eternal Spirit once offered up unto God, hath fully satisfied the justice of his Father; and purchased not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for all those whom the Father hath given unto him.

THE LARGER CATECHISM (BOC, 7.066)

Q66. What is that union which the elect have with Christ?

A. The union which the elect have with Christ is the work of God's grace, whereby they are spiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably, joined to Christ as their head and husband; which is done in their effectual calling.

Essential Tenet

We are all sinners who fall short of God’s glory, and we all deserve God’s eternal judgment. Apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ, we are incapable of being in God’s presence, incapable of bearing the weight of His glory. We rejoice that Jesus Christ offers us safe conduct into the heart of God’s consuming and purifying fire, shielding us with His perfect humanity and transforming us by His divine power. Having received such grace, we extend grace to others.

IV. SERVING AND SAVING POWER OF HOLY SPIRIT

Scriptures:

Matthew 5:13-16

Matthew 28:16-20

Romans 10:13b-15

Acts 1:8

Philippians 2:12-16
Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms:

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH, CHAPTER XXXV; Of the Gospel of the Love of God and Missions (BOC, 6.190)

4. Since there is no other way of salvation than that revealed in the gospel, and since in the divinely established and ordinary method of grace faith cometh by hearing the Word of God, Christ hath commissioned his Church to go into all the world and to make disciples of all nations. All believers are, therefore, under obligation to sustain the ordinance of the Christian religion where they are already established, and to contribute by their prayers, gifts, and personal efforts to the extension of the Kingdom of Christ throughout the whole earth.

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH, CHAPTER IX; Of the Holy Spirit (BOC, 6.053)

3. The Holy Spirit, whom the Father is ever willing to give to all who ask him, is the only efficient agent in the application of redemption. He regenerates men by his grace, convicts them of sin, moves them to repentance, and persuades and enables them to embrace Jesus Christ by faith. He unites all believers to Christ, dwells in them as their Comforter and Sanctifier, gives to them the spirit of Adoption and Prayer, and performs all those gracious offices by which they are sanctified and sealed unto the day of redemption.

Essential Tenet

We are not elect for our own benefit alone. God gathers His covenant community to be an instrument of His saving purpose. Through His regenerating and sanctifying work, the Holy Spirit grants us faith and enables holiness, so that we may be witnesses of God’s gracious presence to those who are lost. We are now in service to God’s plan for the fullness of time: uniting all things in heaven and earth to Himself. To this end, we preach Christ, calling all persons to repent and believe the gospel. We also care for the natural world, claim all areas of culture in the name of Jesus, serve the poor, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, and defend the helpless. We do this work not with any thought that we are able to bring in the kingdom, but in the confident hope that God’s kingdom is surely coming, a day when suffering and death will pass away and when God will live among His people.

NOTES FROM CLASS DISCUSSION
QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

1. “Having lost true freedom of will in the fall, we are incapable of turning toward God of our own volition. God chooses us for Himself in grace before the foundation of the world.” What does Paul have to say about the choosing love of God (Eph. 1:3-6)?

2. Paul’s statement of God’s electing choice is filled with praise. Why is this wonderful to know and challenging to believe?

3. How do you respond to the idea that your life in Christ is not an after-thought on the part of God but something He did before He created the world?

4. Before believing in Christ, we were dead in their transgressions and sins (Ephesians 2:1-4). What do you think it means to be spiritually dead?

5. The life-giving call of God also includes regeneration; i.e., God gives life to the dead. According to Ephesians 2:4-8, what does it mean to be spiritually alive?

6. God’s electing choice is “in Christ” not apart from Christ. How does Paul convey this in the passage from Ephesians 1:3-14?

7. Effectual calling means that God’s call works; it’s effective! It doesn’t mean that we are manipulated or forced. Rather, “By His enticing call on our lives, Jesus enlightens our minds, softens our hearts, and renews our wills, restoring the freedom that we lost in the fall.” What is supernatural and what is natural about our believing in Christ?

8. Our spiritual inabilities not only mean that we can’t save our selves, we can’t even keep a relationship with God by our own power; we are spiritually “incapable.” However, “[w]e rejoice that Jesus Christ offers us safe conduct into the heart of God’s consuming and purifying fire, shielding us with His perfect humanity and transforming us by His divine power.” How do you respond, knowing the depth of your inabilities and the necessity for God’s power?

9. “We are not elect for our own benefit alone. God gathers his covenant community to be an instrument of His saving purpose.” What is Jesus’ expectation for the work of the Holy Spirit in the mission and ministry of his Church (Acts 1:8; Acts 10:44-48)?

10. The wind, flame, and languages of the Spirit (Acts 2:1-4) bring inspiration to act, light to penetrate darkness, and words to proclaim in every culture and language. Where do you see that inspiration, light, and proclamation by the Spirit in the Church today?

11. “The Spirit gathers us in a community that is built up and equipped to be light, salt, and yeast in the world” (Ephesians 4:7-13). What are some of the ways that the Spirit has equipped your church for ministry and mission?

12. The ministry of Jesus Christ is for all the world. That is why “We also care for the natural world, claim all areas of culture in the name of Jesus, serve the poor, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, and defend the helpless.” What acts of service have you been involved in, and how do you think they have demonstrated the Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ?