

The Doctrine of Election and Corporate Worship

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“Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’ and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’ And in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ there they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’”¹ The debate over the doctrine of election has been a long and difficult one, splitting churches and filling volumes as men seek to understand the implications of passages such as Romans 9 in light of the whole of scripture. As few agree completely in their understanding of the doctrine, it is largely overlooked or circumnavigated in regards to the theology of worship. However, an adequate doctrine of election that provides revelation of God rather than a “fogging of the mirror” and is centered upon Christ rather than man would provide vital instruction for the practices of the church, particularly in regards to corporate worship and music. Specifically, it would help us to see that corporate worship should not be centered upon and primarily concerned with music, and should above all exhibit these characteristics: proclamation, structured prayer, and public confession.

Many of those who have undertaken the task of writing on the theology of worship have done so under the assumption that the doctrine of election is separate from this matter and can be avoided so as not to lose any readers on such a superfluous point. Harold Best is typical as one of the most respected and influential authors in the realm of worship in the Church. In his critical work *Unceasing Worship*, he provides a stunning definition of worship that is vital to the church and yet illustrates precisely this point. “Worship is the continuous outpouring of all that I am, all that I do and all that I can ever become in light of a chosen or choosing god.”² Best suggests that the statement “chosen or

¹ Romans 9:25-26 ESV; with ref. to Hos. 2:23

² Harold M. Best, *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 18.

choosing” points out two opposing theological traditions (those of Calvin and Arminius) as well as depicting the confusion inherent in the fall of man. The inclusion of this portion of the statement points out his belief that regardless of ones position in this debate, our theology and practices of worship will be the same. Best admirably handles the topic and nevertheless provides a striking account for the definition, purpose, and practice of worship. However, these statements reveal an assumption on his part that is inadequate, namely the assumption that the doctrine of election does not critically inform or affect our understanding and practices of worship.

To the contrary, the doctrine of election is vital to our understanding of the theology and practices of worship. Karl Barth has placed the doctrine of election “at the beginning, indeed, before the beginning of everything that is to be said about God’s dealings with His creatures.”³ Our theology and understanding of worship should follow suit and place the doctrine of election at the beginning, because this informs and reforms our understanding of worship and our practices within the Church; specifically those relating to music.

This discussion must begin with a look at the three major traditional understandings of election and predestination, and then a discussion of their shortcomings. It is important to note that, though they differ on the meaning of election, the major theologians discussing these doctrines all believe that it informs everything else we say about God in his relation to us, and that must include worship and music. Calvin writes in his work *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* that “they are malicious injurers of God who consider the doctrine of eternal election burdensome and vexatious. For, if it

³ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*. (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1956), pg. #89.

is buried out of sight, half of the grace of God must vanish with it.”⁴ Even with different views regarding this doctrine, they agree that it is essential to our understanding of God and our relation to him.

The first position to be considered comes from John Calvin (1509-1564) and is called “Supralapsarianism.” Calvin suggests that God elects above or prior to the fall.⁵ God does not act with reference to sin or foreknowledge of faith, “he does not call them elect because they are about to believe, but in order that they may believe.”⁶ The result of this is a “Double Decree” which Calvin describes in this way: “Therefore, as any man has been created to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him as predestined to life or death.”⁷ In other words, God elects some to salvation and some to damnation on no other basis than his divine will, which we cannot understand. Calvin emphasizes these two actions as “sovereign and gratuitous election” and “sovereign and just reprobation,” and points out that this is an act of grace.

In response to the difficulty in this position, because Scripture has revealed to us that God wills all to be saved (e.g. 1 Tim 2:3-4)⁸, Calvin may emphasize Proverbs 16:4, “The Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble,” along with Psalm 135:6 and Job 14:5.⁹ Calvin continually points to the idea that we

⁴ Jean Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*. (London: J. Clarke, 1961), 57.

⁵ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2011), 368.

⁶ Jean Calvin, 69.

⁷ Fred H. Klooster, *Calvin's Doctrine of Predestination*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977), 25.

⁸ “This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” -1 Tim 2:3-4 ESV

⁹ “Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps.”- Psalm 135:6 ESV. “Since his days are determined, and the number of his months is with you, and you have appointed his limits that he cannot pass” –Job 14:5 ESV.

cannot understand God's ways. "For more excellent than wisdom is the soberness of mind which is regulated by the fear of God and keeps within the limits of intelligence prescribed by Him."¹⁰ This view includes an understanding of eternal security that is unprecedented in other doctrine, for if salvation and damnation are determined solely by God and in no way influenced by man's decisions or actions, then there is none who can snatch the saved from the hand of God.

Infralapsarianism is the second major position and comes from the writings of Calvin, but is more largely influenced by Augustine of Hippo (354-430). Augustine writes of a "mass of perdition" which God sees after the fall (not chronologically, but logically),¹¹ and out of which God elects some to salvation from his foreknowledge of sin.¹² This is a single decree in which all men were destined for reprobation because of their sin, but some were predestined for salvation by the grace of God. This is derived largely from Romans 8:29, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers," along with Acts 2:23 and Isaiah 48:3-5¹³.

The final of the three major historical positions is stated by Jacob Arminius (1609-1650) and is known as "Semi-Pelagianism." Arminius suggests that election is to the

¹⁰ Jean Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, 59.

¹¹ This means that it is not as though God is somehow watching this unfold and seeing what will happen, rather that in creating creatures who are not God and giving them free will there is a logical progression in which they sin and become this "mass of perdition." As much as logic is an anthropomorphism, it is still useful to point out that what is not being said is that God is somehow surprised by this foresight.

¹² Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 366.

¹³ "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." –Acts 2:23 ESV.

means of choice and that all are given the spirit (prevenient grace) so that man's will is not dead, it is merely sick. Some may choose (by the spirit) to say, "yes" to grace and others will resist the spirit.¹⁴ God's foreknowledge is of those who say yes, and the extent of Christ's atonement is unlimited.¹⁵ Second Peter 3:9 ("not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance") and Deuteronomy 30:15-19 speak to this position, as do other texts that emphasize the free will of man. This position, however, suggests a conditional security (e.g. Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:26) because it rests upon man's actions and decisions, not God's.¹⁶

Evangelicals are largely split on these positions because all three derive from some scriptural support yet neglect other important passages. The four major shortcomings of these positions are as follows. First, they abstract to a God behind the Word who is an "unknown quantity."¹⁷ They suggest that Christ came to fulfill the electing decisions which God made before all time and that there is a God who is acting behind and above the Word which we cannot really know. As such, they (secondly) are lost in ultimate mystery. They assume that God is ultimately unknowable to us and we must accept that we have only a limited view of him.

How often has not the power of the proclamation of the gospel been weakened by the doctrine of election and the impression been created that the mirror of election is not in all respects a *clear* mirror? Too often the impression has been left that a final uncertainty remained—even after the preaching of salvation in Christ—and this has not infrequently led to a *passive* Christianity that was numbed by staring into a dizzying abyss of the divine majesty in its inscrutable and unrevealed ultimate decision.¹⁸

¹⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 369.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 368.

¹⁶ "For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,"—Hebrews 10:26 ESV

¹⁷ Karl Barth, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Thomas F. Torrance, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2 pt. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 146.

¹⁸ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 97.

This point will be well illustrated by a discussion of the relationship between the imminent and economic trinity.¹⁹ Thirdly, doctrine in the church ought to reveal God, not hide him. The doctrine of election is often the point where Christians “give up” trying to know God because they cannot understand his ways and therefore must accept that they will never have a solid understanding of their Lord and Savior because he is ultimately mysterious. Lastly, these perspectives promote an abstract humanity, once again an “unknown quantity” of man that has no face or name.²⁰

Karl Barth (1886-1968) is a renowned theologian from Switzerland whose central “theme” is said to be “God as He has revealed Himself to the world in Jesus Christ according to the witness of Scripture.”²¹ Barth has been regarded as one of the most important theologians since Thomas Aquinas and relentlessly stresses the humility inherent in and necessary to theology, in that it cannot “own” its subject, it can only bear witness to it according to its (his) self-revelation in the Word.²² Barth’s culminating work, *Church Dogmatics*, is a vital source for all theologians since his time and is the main source for the topic of this essay.

¹⁹ See Pg. 11

²⁰ Aaron T Smith, “Special Revelation B: Tradition as the Church’s Reflection upon the Word (Church Dogmatics)” (THE 201 lecture at Colorado Christian University, Lakewood, Co, February 13, 2012).

²¹ Karl Barth, Geoffrey William. Bromiley, and Helmut Gollwitzer, *Karl Barth: Church Dogmatics: A Selection* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 1.

²² Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology, an Introduction*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 7.

Barth suggests an alternative understanding of election to those outlined above that contains two major points: that Jesus Christ is the electing God and that Jesus Christ is the elect man.²³

The election of grace is the eternal beginning of all the ways and works of God in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ God in His free grace determines Himself for sinful man and sinful man for Himself. He therefore takes upon Himself the rejection of man with all its consequences, and elects man to participation in His own glory.²⁴

Jesus Christ exists as the will and grace of God in that he does not simply remain within the eternal inward being of God, but operates outwardly—as God chooses from all eternity to exist in relation to man.²⁵ Not only this, but Christ is determined from all eternity to exist as man, and as the elect, the first-born of all men. Christ is the elected man, not standing beside all other elected men, but primarily before and above them. However, he is not only the elect man, he is also the electing God as he is one with God from all eternity and is “the will of God in action.”²⁶ In Trinitarian terms, God exists as one essence in three persons, along with the Holy Spirit who “is none other than the Spirit of this act of obedience, the Spirit of obedience itself, and for us the Spirit of adoption.”²⁷

God’s election of Christ is a decision to suffer.²⁸ God chose to create and redeem man, to exist in relationship with man, and to allow man to share in his glory, not as God, but in his image.²⁹ He is, however, a just God who judges and condemns evil, in no way

²³ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 369.

²⁴ Karl Barth, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Thomas F. Torrance, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2 pt. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 94.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 104-105.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

²⁹ Tom Greggs, "'Jesus Is Victor': Passing the Impasse of Barth on Universalism," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60, no. 2 (2007): 201, <http://ezproxy.ccu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/222366724?accountid=10200>.

overlooking it to accomplish association with man. But he is merciful, and he chose to take that judgment upon himself, assuming man's deserved and necessary suffering and condemnation as his own.³⁰ To clarify why this is a point of contention, traditional understanding would agree that Christ is the elected man only in that as a man, he was one of the elect. What is being stated here to the contrary is that Christ is *the* elect above all others, through and in whose election all other men may share.³¹ This means that Christ is elect as creator, as God himself, not just as man.

It is important to point out something that was central to traditional doctrine and must be central here as well: "In the predestination of the man Jesus we see what predestination is always and everywhere—the acceptance and reception of man only by the free grace of God."³² It was not God's foreknowledge of the life decisions of Christ that enabled Christ to be the elect man; it was only the grace of God (who is himself). The decision to exist as Christ and to elect Christ was done in all eternity and not in reference to anything Christ would accomplish or become while on earth (though his election was precisely a decision that those things would happen). Therefore, our election is only a free act of grace, in Him, and in no way determined based on our actions.³³

Man is elect in Christ; from all eternity God chose to exist for us, and us for him. He chose to condemn our sin but to take that condemnation upon himself. God did not do so as a static decision in an abstract eternity; rather, he willed to determine himself as a dynamic, moving, and working God who exists in relation to his creation. This

³⁰ Karl Barth, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Thomas F. Torrance, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2 pt. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 167.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 116.

³² *Ibid.*, 118, (see also Philippians 2:5-11).

³³ *Ibid.*, 118.

understanding no longer provides a God who is an unknown quantity as we have in tradition. A God who is ultimate mystery, who may be utterly separate and above his dealings with and revelation to man “no doubt... does and often has kindled sensations of a fearful or pleasurable awe, but in the long run its effect is not to build up but to scatter and destroy.”³⁴ Adoration necessitates knowledge of him who is to be adored, and as long as he is somehow obscured, man cannot be properly humbled to adulation, to worship.³⁵

God stands only to lose in electing man and man stands only to benefit.³⁶ Election has only one name, Jesus Christ, and as such reveals the dynamic, glorious, unrelenting, and perfect love of God. “In so far as it [election] is directed to perdition and death, it is not directed to the perdition and death of man.”³⁷ God does not will life and death. God wills only life, and death exists as the negation of his eternal decree. It does not exist, however, as an equal, but as subordinate to and conquered by the life decreed by God in the death of Christ. The double sided coin of death for some and life for others is instead one of death for God and life for man.³⁸

In so far as election is a decision, it is a dynamic, living decision to live for man, to pursue him and to evoke in him faith and a reciprocal election of God. “What is truly unchangeable cannot simply be immovable.”³⁹ God is in no way bound to an eternal decree, but faithfully and continually chooses to draw us to him, to exist precisely as the God he has revealed himself to be. Barth says “God willed this movement, willed it from

³⁴ Ibid., 147.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 162.

³⁷ Ibid., 166.

³⁸ Ibid., 163.

³⁹ Ibid., 185.

all eternity and continues to will it.”⁴⁰ God has chosen to place us in front of him, face to face, addressing us as his children. In response to this we are called to prayer, to respond in turn as Christ did, saying ‘your will be done.’

The steadfastness of Christ provides the example of our part as the elect. The elect are precisely those who are called by the word and who respond to the love of God. This doctrine may be called Universalism by hope, but not in fact.⁴¹ God wills that all should be saved, and has elected all mankind in Christ to be drawn to him. Their response is to become part of a lineage of faith, a people of prayer, orienting themselves in response to God’s alignment of himself to them and glorifying him even as they are still sinners who have been redeemed and promised sanctification.

The relationship between the economic and immanent Trinity is the point at which Barth’s doctrine of election finds its largest impact.

What Barth accomplished in his doctrine of election was to establish a hermeneutical rule which would allow the church to speak authoritatively about what God was doing—and, indeed, who and what God was/is—‘before the foundation of the world’, *without engaging in speculation*.⁴²

The immanent trinity is understood as God *ad intra*, his inner life and self-relating in eternity. The economic trinity is God *ad extra*, his dealings with creation outside himself to effect salvation.⁴³ The traditional view as stated by Thomas Aquinas is that the immanent trinity (Father, Son, Spirit) is the economic trinity (Creator, Reconciler,

⁴⁰ Ibid., 186.

⁴¹ Aaron T Smith, “Special Revelation B: Tradition as the Church’s Reflection upon the Word (Church Dogmatics)” (THE 201 lecture at Colorado Christian University, Lakewood, Co, February 13, 2012).

⁴² Bruce McCormack, “*Grace and Being*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John B. Webster (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92.

⁴³ Paul D. Molnar, *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Michael Dempsey (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2011), 69.

Redeemer), *but not vice versa*.⁴⁴ Contrastingly, Barth is suggesting (with Karl Rahner) that the Immanent Trinity is the economic trinity, *and vice versa*.⁴⁵ Instead of “defining Godness as eternal autonomy,”⁴⁶ we define Godness as being precisely who God chooses to be.⁴⁷ God has chosen an existence relative to man and man can thus speak of God as one who chose from all eternity to exist precisely as Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer because he has the freedom to do so.⁴⁸

The doctrine of election informs all that Barth writes about God (after having formulated it), including much of his work, *Church Dogmatics*, which is 8,396 pages long.⁴⁹ Obviously much more could be said on the subject, but this will suffice for the purposes of this essay. A radical reformation of the traditional view of election deeply affects our theology, and therefore must also affect our practices in the church. What was delineated above has much to say about both the theology and practices of worship for the Church and will now be worked out largely in relation to the work of Harold Best (1931-Present), one of the foremost voices of Christian music, art, and worship in the United States.⁵⁰

Best, as stated earlier, defines worship as follows, “Worship is the continuous outpouring of all that I am, all that I do and all that I can ever become in light of a chosen

⁴⁴ Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 207.

⁴⁵ Michael T. Dempsey, *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, 4.

⁴⁶ Aaron T Smith, “Special Revelation B: Tradition as the Church’s Reflection upon the Word (Church Dogmatics)” (THE 201 lecture at Colorado Christian University, Lakewood, Co, February 13, 2012).

⁴⁷ Michael T. Dempsey, *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, 10.

⁴⁸ J. B. Webster, *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, 98.

⁴⁹ Suzanne McDonald, “Barth’s ‘Other’ Doctrine of Election in the Church Dogmatics,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9, no. 2 (April 2007): 135, accessed April 6, 2012, EBSCOhost.

⁵⁰ “Harold M. Best Biographical Sketch,” Leadership University, January 8, 1999, accessed April 06, 2012, <http://www.leaderu.com/offices/haroldbest/bio.html>.

or choosing god.”⁵¹ If what Barth and others with him are suggesting is the case, then we must alter this understanding to say the following. “Worship is the continuous outpouring of all that I am, all that I do, and all that I can ever become in the light of an *elect and electing God*.” These alterations both reform and inform Best’s initial definition.

Best discusses the four major points of this statement, starting with the fact that “this definition includes the entire human race.”⁵² This is not just about Christians, but all people. The reason ‘god’ is not capitalized in Best’s original definition lies here, that all people are living in submission to their ‘god,’ that which masters them and to which they give their worship. All of humanity should rightly be included in this definition, as it was for the entire human race that Christ died, and it is the entire human race who is elect in Christ. It is also vital to the definition that it discusses all of the ‘gods,’ or idols, that man direct their worship to. God has now been capitalized here, however, to point to the specific nature of Christ as the elect man and electing God, and signify the fact that all of creation exists in relation to this, even if not all will respond to the election of God. This need not detract from the point that this definition includes the fact that worship may be directed away from God and that such worship is sin. It does, however, subordinate this point to the fact of the dynamic God who pursues and elects them from all eternity and is at all times vigorously involved throughout their lives of worship.

The second point is that “the words about a chosen or choosing god are meant not only to articulate two fundamentally contrasting theological positions taken within the body of Christ but also to depict the confused condition of lostness itself.”⁵³ Best notes

⁵¹ Harold M. Best, *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 18.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 18.

that there is a traditional disagreement between Calvin and Arminius about choosing God and being chosen by him and says that we are lost and delusional about both of these. He seems to suggest that the idea is ultimately a mystery, and that our brokenness has led to a disagreement on this point that is unnecessary. To the contrary, the issue need not be mystery, though it certainly and necessarily includes mystery. Much of what Barth does is taking care to define things where Scripture has provided understanding, to define the mysteries where they exist, and then to leave them as mystery as far as they are to be left there by Scripture. If we did not do so then we would attribute more mystery to him than he has willed through his self-revelation, and we would leave ourselves to project some image of ourselves upon God as we attempt to worship him as mystery.

Another problem with this second point is more of a critique of Calvin and Arminius than of Best, as Best does properly articulate their conflict. The fundamental difference between Barth and Calvin is not their views of the *extent* of election, but their views of God himself.⁵⁴ Traditional doctrines of election assumed to be speaking primarily of the extent of the election of man, as to who is elect and how and where man's free will comes in. Barth sees this as a secondary concern and holds the doctrine of election to be primarily a question of "who is the God who elects and what does a knowledge of this God tell us about the nature of election?"⁵⁵ Election informs how we speak of God, and thus informs how we worship God; it is not merely a mystery and must be treated as central to our understanding of worship.

⁵⁴ Bruce McCormack, "Grace and Being," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John B. Webster (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 98.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

The replacement of the words “chosen or choosing god,” with “elect and electing God,” has two major determinations. The first (as stated above) is to insert the doctrine of election, to state here that Christ is the electing God and the elect man and all of the implications therein and so signify its necessity within the theology of worship. Second, and most important, is to point to the fact that God is active in the process. We are free to choose where our worship is directed, but we are not left alone in the decision. “The Lord is my shepherd” and he loves, wills, draws, and leads man towards himself moment by moment, for without such dynamic pursuit, surely no man would find him, nor kneel in adoration and prayer.

Third, Best explains that “the definition stresses the reality and foundational importance of continuousness.”⁵⁶ Worship is not an action or practice that begins and ends at certain times and, though it may take a variety of forms, it is continuous. “When we sin, worship does not stop. It changes directions and reverts back to what it once was, even if only for an instant.”⁵⁷ We might relate this insight to Barth as follows: God has elected to live dynamically in relation to us, and has elected us to live dynamically in relation to him. Worship is precisely this relationship, and it is directed toward him and glorifies him precisely when we respond in prayer and take up our side of the covenant in submission to his will. When it is not this, it is directed to darkness; it is focused toward that which is necessarily not elect at all times that it is directed away from God. There is no third option of being directed to nothing, or of not being directed at all.

⁵⁶ Harold M. Best, *Unceasing Worship*, 18.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

The fourth and final observation is that in regards to the entire definition, “the term *continuous outpouring* particularly stands out... *Continuous* implies relentlessness.”⁵⁸ In opposition to the sporadic nature of things on earth, continuousness is the essence of God. Hebrews 13:8 says, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” Similarly, we are continuous worshippers, though we certainly cannot be said to direct this continuity as faithfully as Christ did. Outpouring “implies lavishness and generosity.”⁵⁹ It is not an evening of the score or filling of a quota, but a pouring out, completely and unreservedly. At its essence, worship has an unrestrained quality, regardless of where it is directed, and therefore “whatever its kind and quality, is bound to change the outpourer.”⁶⁰

We are continuous outpourers because we are made in the image of God, and he is a continuous outpourer.⁶¹ This is especially well understood in light of the doctrine of election. God chose from all eternity to exist in a certain way, to take our punishment upon himself, and to draw us to him, moment by moment in love. This is a continuous act that never wavers or tires, not because of an unbreakable decree that it would be so, but because of the unfailing constancy and perfection of God. Living in the *Imago Dei* we constantly outpour worship in every moment of our being and we are elect in Christ to do so towards God, to his glory alone.

What then shall we do?⁶² The implications of these alterations to Best’s definition upon the corporate practices of worship in the Church are twofold. There are things that

⁵⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁶¹ Ibid., 23.

⁶² Echoing the question the crowd posited toward Jesus in Luke 3:10- ESV

we should do differently, and there are things that we should do the same, but with different or better understanding of why and how. The list will not be surveyed exhaustively here, rather with a sense of exploration and certainly some abstraction. The implications to be explored assume the character of joy, vibrancy, interaction, and prayer. We serve a God who chose us in Christ, who chose to take our condemnation upon himself so that we may have life. We have been chosen to active participation in a relationship with God, we have been set before him, face to face as he pours out his love, and we have the opportunity to respond humbly and joyously with shouts of praise and proclamation.

(Speaking personally, in approaching this project I was hesitant toward writing about music and worship. In my opinion, much of the topic has been written exhaustively and is chock-full of defenses of preferred styles or practices, as well as an overwhelming use of scripture to justify every small musical decision made, from instruments to chord progressions and choices of modality. I am part of a generation that has made music their idol, to an extent that we may consider a radical reconsideration of the place of music in the church today. Short of that, it is my opinion that music needs no further biblical justification, especially in light of our understanding of the theology of worship. If everything we do is worship, then corporate worship through music is no more “spiritual” than directing our worship to God as we bake or prepare our taxes. Though music is special in many ways and must be a large part of the following discussion [largely due to its relationship to text], I do not wish to overemphasize it in light of the discussion thus far.)

We have been called to glorify God as we direct the worship that is our lives toward him and as we come together to worship him corporately. So what should that corporate worship look like? It is first important to point out that the Bible leaves ample room for possibilities. There is extensive freedom of style, elements, language, location, etc. However, as we consider how to proceed, we must consider how to best accomplish our purpose, and it is vital that we select elements of corporate worship with utmost prayer and consideration. Therefore, there are some ways that worship may look differently in light of election, not to limit the church, but to inform it and spur it on to excellence.

God has called us to worship him. In and of ourselves, we are incapable of recognizing God as good or even desiring his goodness. We are fallen and in that state the only thing we possess is our transgression, our willful disobedience against God.⁶³ However, God wills for us to be saved—for us to know him, recognize him, and worship him. From all eternity we were created as the elect in Christ, and God determined himself to be our God. God chooses to be such not as one who controls us as puppets, but as a God who loves us and addresses us as his sons and daughters.⁶⁴ Therefore, there is power in utilizing a call to worship, reminding us that we did not decide God was worthy by our own brilliance, but because God chose to reveal himself to us and draw us to him. Passages such as Psalm 47:1-2, 5-6 provide an ideal call to worship and can be used in many forms (i.e. call and response or reading/prayer):⁶⁵ “Clap your hands, all you

⁶³ Karl Barth, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Thomas F. Torrance, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2 pt. 2, 123.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁶⁵ *The Worship Sourcebook*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, 2004), 50.

peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy. For the LORD, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth. God has gone up with a shout, the LORD with the sound of a trumpet. Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises.”

If God is an unknown quantity, an ultimate mystery that mankind knows something about but does not know ultimately, then we are left to project aspects of ourselves upon him in order to kneel in adoration of Him.⁶⁶ However, if what Barth is suggesting is true, then God is precisely who he has revealed himself to be. God has chosen from all eternity to exist in relation to us, to exist as Christ, and to exist as our loving father. As a result, our worship should be centered on proclamation, rather than in transcendent mysterious awe. As we gather together, we will not wish to incite a state of wonderment based on the mystery that is God, for this is not adoration. We instead focus on who God is, precisely as he has revealed himself to be, and proclaim this to the world and to each other.

The need for worship centered on proclamation is well illustrated in the practices of many churches in America in the last decade. Worship music has been conveyed as our opportunity to let go and invite the Holy Spirit to come down from heaven so we can experience the mysterious and transcendent feeling that is God. However, as Best takes great care to elucidate, “let’s not falsely label our high emotions as a visitation of God’s power. Emotion in worship is good, and the presence of God is good, but they are two different things that are not always experienced simultaneously.”⁶⁷ Under the new covenant of Christ the Holy Spirit indwells believers. This means that he does not show

⁶⁶ Karl Barth, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Thomas F. Torrance, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2 pt. 2, 147.

⁶⁷ Harold M. Best, *Unceasing Worship*, 149.

up suddenly when the worship team sings the big bridge of a song; he was there before the congregation even began singing and he was working among them before they ever stood together to pray. Emotion is not a bad thing, but it can easily be misdirected, and as soon as it is misunderstood to be the presence of God it becomes an idol.⁶⁸

The purpose of corporate worship is not an attempt to “bridge the gap” between God and us. If God is moment-by-moment addressing himself to us and drawing us to him, then worship takes on precisely the character of response. We are not trying to draw him across the divide via some ritual, which may somehow summon him. Neither are we trying to place ourselves in some state, emotional or otherwise, which makes us suddenly worthy of coming into his presence. God has chosen to place himself face to face with us, by no merit or action of our own. We are to respond in turn, using the language with which he has addressed us and in the character of his revelation to us.

The importance of the doctrine of election is that it allows us to speak of God without engaging in speculation.⁶⁹ Not only that, it requires that we do so.⁷⁰ As a result, man may speak with confidence that the God they come before in worship is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God is Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer, and he is precisely the God of justice and of love that he has revealed himself to be. God is infinite, glorious, and in some ways mysterious. But he is not ultimately mystery, nor wholly detached from us, as he has chosen to create us in his image and to exist for us and us for

⁶⁸ Ibid., 166.

⁶⁹ Bruce McCormack, “*Grace and Being*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John B. Webster (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92. (Recall pg. 12 of this essay)

⁷⁰ Kevin W. Hector, *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Michael Dempsey (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2011), 31.

him. We are called to come together and ascribe praise to him alone, to proclaim his works among the nations and to offer our hearts as he has offered his.

The doctrine of election will surely affect the use of music in worship, and will especially reform that of the contemporary worship movement. The 19th century brought about the beginning of a shift in hymnody, from writing about what God has done to how *I* feel about what God has done.⁷¹ This has shifted even further in contemporary music to focusing on who I feel God is based centrally on my experiences. There is power in personal testimony, but it *must* be subordinate to Scripture. Songs must speak of God precisely as he is revealed in Scripture. Another trend is one of saying very little about God besides that he is glorious and mysterious. However, God has revealed his glory through his actions in history and we should worship God in relation to those actions.

A local preacher once asked on a Sunday morning, “Would you still worship God even if he chose not to die for you?” This question illustrates the thoughts of many men and women in the church in recent times, surely well intentioned but very much mistaken. They are trying to signify the fact that God would be worthy of worship even if he did not work positively in our lives. However, God created and redeemed mankind in one act of election; there is no God or creation apart from the electing God who is Jesus Christ, who died for the sins of mankind. Therefore our songs should not try and point to an abstract God who is worthy of our worship regardless of what he does in relation to us. They must point to the Creator who lovingly made man in his image, to the Reconciler who gave himself as ransom for all, and the Redeemer who is enacting the sanctification of mankind through the blood of Christ. It is precisely in God’s works *ad extra* that he has revealed

⁷¹ James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 172.

himself *ad intra* to be worshipped. And as God *ad intra* and *ad extra* are one in the same, there is no difference between God's work and will toward us and his work and will within his triune being.

Imago Dei is a term widely used by artists in the church and it provides yet another point of contact for the doctrine of election. As long as God is an unknown quantity, men begin to speak of God in relation to themselves. If they like music and pizza, then God must like music and pizza because they are made in his image. However, if God is precisely who he is in relation to man in history, then we must speak of ourselves in relation to him and *not vice versa*. We may say that God is revealed as creative and so we are creative as *imago dei*. We do not suspect that God is creative because we are. This will affect the language used in corporate worship, as we use art to glorify God.

Ultimately, idolatry is the question at hand. How may we avoid directing our worship toward anything other than God who alone is worthy of it? This is not an unanswerable question and scripture has much to say on the subject. For one, God is love.⁷² That God is also our judge does not necessitate that he be dualistic in his temperament, for God is a judge out of his love for us.⁷³ If God chose some men for damnation, we may rightly question his love, or resign ourselves to the fact that we do not truly know God. If instead, God wills all to be saved and took the condemnation of all upon himself on the cross, then he is very clearly and consistently loving, even in (or especially in) his wrath against sin and darkness. Such an understanding can not but lead us to adoration, to kneeling before God—not with one eye open in case his unloving side

⁷² 1 John 4:8, ESV

⁷³ Psalm 7:11 ESV

should decide to show up, but fully and humbly in worship to him as our father, because he first loved us.

Having been provided the surest sense of who God is, theology gives way to doxology. The Church stands in awe of God who loves wholly, sacrificially, and unceasingly. Man begins to model his life after that of Christ, not as an attempt to repay him for his sacrifice, but out of recognition of God as a living subject who is pursuing a relationship with them. Man responds in prayer, in conversation with a very real and living God. Such a conversation necessitates a response on the part of man, for God is not sitting back in eternity watching his commands unfold, he is willing, pursuing, and loving his creation moment by moment and drawing them to elect to live for him.

As man begins to pray, he sees his own sin and brokenness. He sees God's hate for his sin and begins to repent. As in any relationship, there is a desire to please the other, and man begins to turn away from his willful disobedience. Confession of sin is a taking up of arms against our sinful nature.⁷⁴ God is glorified when, by his light, we see our sinfulness and confess that it ought not be. Doing so corporately is a powerful practice within the Church. Darkness may not shy away from a full chorus sung by a choir, but it certainly retreats in the light of confession. And in confession we see the grace inherent in God's wrath. We see that God wills to judge sin, and wills for us to be conquerors of sin rather than slaves to it, and so he takes that judgment upon himself so that, by no merit of our own, we share in the glory of God. This was the plan from the beginning; God chose to create and redeem man and to exist as the electing God and as

⁷⁴ Aaron T Smith, "Hamartiology" (THE 201 lecture at Colorado Christian University, Lakewood, Co, March 19, 2012).

the elect man. As a result we are not oppressed to a state of despair by this confession, but elevated to joy.

In response to the particular nature of God's revelation, prayer in corporate services takes on the posture of proclamation as we answer to the very real and personal God who has addressed us as his bride. The nature of his discourse toward us is very specific and intentional and so our response ought to take on a similar posture. Therefore structured prayer ought to have a place in addition to and above that of extemporaneous prayer. Our prayers ought to involve forethought in light of scripture, and our response should echo the language with which God has addressed us. All too often in contemporary services prayer is a response to an emotional musical experience rather than a response to scripture and the person and work of Christ. Once again, personal testimony has a place and we are rightly emotional in light of the grace of God. However, we must subordinate this to scripture. We see all Biblical authors taking great care with the language they use, and as we respond in turn we ought to reflect this intentionality.

Historically, the church has taken up this intentionality and regularly stood together to proclaim precisely what they believe as the body of Christ. Creeds serve as a testimony of the beliefs of the church to the world, as a summation of doctrine for instruction, and as a baseline to return to as we grow in understanding the truth of scripture.⁷⁵ In light of the doctrine of election, we see even more acutely that we do not have the "luxury" (or rather the horrid task) of deciding who God is to us in our specific community based on our experience. God has revealed himself to be very specific things

⁷⁵ Robert S. Rayburn, "Biblical and Pastoral Basis for Creeds and Confessions | The Reformed Reader," *The Reformed Reader*, March 29, 1996, <http://www.reformedreader.org/bpcc.htm>.

regardless of our experience. It is therefore vital to corporate worship that we, as a body, declare precisely what it is that we believe about God. In addition, the use of traditional creeds such as the Nicene or Apostle's creed provides us with a more tangible sense of being part of a lineage of faith that spans generations and millennia.⁷⁶

There is a movement away from Creeds in the modern church, as society pushes more and more toward the belief that "newer is better" and that history is merely an obstruction holding humanity back. There is a tendency to want to interpret scripture primarily in light of our own experiences and not be 'tied down' to past understandings. However, God has revealed himself through the history of salvation enacted upon the Israelite Nation and the church. This history and the understanding of those who came before us are vital to our current practices and comprehension. The Creeds "are the distillation of the church's discoveries of the meaning and the implications of the truth as God has revealed it in Holy Scripture and confirmed it in the experience and the conscience of his people."⁷⁷ What better way to glorify God as a body than to declare our belief in Him in one voice with the millions who came before us?

Again we return to the concept of joy as the ultimate and necessary result of election. Our eternal security does not rest upon an immovable decision in all eternity as Calvin suggests; it rests in the promise of God to be for us for all eternity. What could be more secure than such a promise? Man deserves nothing, and yet is loved by God, so deeply that God has taken man's punishment upon himself and has chosen to exist in relation to him. As we dwell on this, our worship cannot but be joyful. That does not mean that our music need be happy, upbeat, and shallow. But it must reflect the truth, and

⁷⁶ Ibid. (Also, recall pg. 11 of this essay).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

that truth is joyful. Man is elect in Christ, there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, and man may relate to God personally by the blood of the lamb.

The final point of contact for the doctrine of election is upon our musical choices, which this pervasive joy must inform. Being in a dynamic relationship with God necessitates a loss of pretense, and therefore the whole range of human emotion can be appropriate in that relationship, and may be reflected in our music as far as it glorifies God and edifies the congregation. All elements of music will be informed by this understanding. Here, we are provided a rather clear picture of the freedom allowed us as we use music to worship God. Although we have expansive freedom in relation to the use of these elements, we are called to a proportionately vigorous intentionality towards them. Every note will be affected by this understanding just as every word is as they work in concert to lead the body of Christ in worship.

The doctrine of election is vital to our understanding of the theology and corporate practices of worship. Even those who disagree with Barth in any point of his understanding must at least acknowledge that the question affects how we speak of God, and therefore how we come before him in worship. The Church's doctrines of God must reveal him, not hide him, and as far as this understanding of election reveals God, so it allows us to humble ourselves and bow before him in adoration. It allows us to worship him as precisely the God of the Bible and as Christ. It urges us to deeply consider all of this as we plan and prepare to lead the Church in worshipping him. The call of the worship leader is equal parts theologian and artist and we find a distinctive point of contact between the two in the doctrine of election. Here we see that our response need be joyfully centered upon proclamation, structured prayer, and public confession rather than

primarily upon music. May the relentless love of God pervade the hearts and minds of the church as we seek to respond to him in turn; and “may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”⁷⁸

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⁷⁸ Romans 15:13 ESV

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