

“What life I have left I want to devote to seeing and savoring and showing God as he really is. I can’t know and love and serve God if I don’t know truth about God. This book describes God the way he really is. The doctrine of unconditional election is personally, pastorally, and politically precious. Personally, because it is sweet to know that I am chosen not because of my qualities but because of God’s grace. Pastorally, because it is powerful to say to a lifelong lecher, ‘No amount or kind of sin can disqualify you from unconditional election.’ And politically, because no nation or ethnic group can be less likely to meet the conditions of unconditional election. I thank God for this truth and this book, and for Sam Storms.”

—JOHN PIPER, Pastor for Preaching and Vision,  
Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis

“Storms’s offensive against Arminian-type views of election among evangelicals is a very solid piece of work. The thoroughness of its arguments gives it conclusive force.”

—J. I. PACKER, Professor of Theology, Regent College

“Sam Storms’s *Chosen for Life: The Case for Divine Election* is well conceived, well reasoned, and well written, with its arguments anchored in the Scriptures. It is fair, thorough, and up-to-date regarding the controversies that swirl around this vital biblical doctrine. And because it is all of these things, it is edifying in the best sense of that term—reading this book will allow you to feed upon one of the most spiritually essential ingredients in God’s Word.”

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“This new edition of *Chosen for Life* has everything one could want on the topic of election. Sam Storms understands the importance of the topic, he holds his view of the topic humbly, he communicates his view clearly, and he celebrates his view passionately. Those who agree will be heartily encouraged; those who disagree will be respectfully challenged; the hearts of *all* will marvel at the glorious grace of God in the gospel. I’m so grateful this new edition has finally arrived.”

—C. J. MAHANEY, Sovereign Grace Ministries

“I am delighted that a revised and expanded edition of Sam Storms’s book *Chosen for Life* is now available. When students have asked me for a concise, clear, pastoral, and practical explanation of election, I have said that *Chosen for Life* is my top choice. When we read Storms, we see why the doctrine of election matters in our everyday lives. *Chosen for Life* reflects the work of an accomplished theologian and an experienced pastor. Most important of all, Storms shows that divine election gives all the glory and honor and praise to God for our salvation. Read it, relish in God’s grace, and rejoice!”

—THOMAS R. SCHREINER, Professor of New Testament Interpretation,  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“This extraordinarily clear and courteous book makes its case without stooping to caricature or invective. It is a fine model of exactly how theological disagreements should be resolved: with respectful listening, careful distinctions, historical awareness, deep reverence for Scripture, and patient exegesis. Storms even reserves space for thoughtful pastoral application. I warmly recommend this book.”

—D. A. CARSON, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School



CHOSEN *for* LIFE

*The Case for Divine Election*

SAM STORMS

CROSSWAY BOOKS

A PUBLISHING MINISTRY OF  
GOOD NEWS PUBLISHERS  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Chosen for Life: The Case for Divine Election*

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Published by Crossway Books  
a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers  
1300 Crescent Street  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

A revised and expanded edition of C. Samuel Storms, *Chosen for Life: An Introductory Guide to the Doctrine of Divine Election* (Baker, 1987).

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Cover design: Jon McGrath

Cover illustration: iStock

First printing 2007

Printed in the United States of America

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Storms, C. Samuel, 1951–

Chosen for life : the case for divine election / Sam Storms. — Rev. and expanded ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 13: 978-1-58134-843-9 (tpb)

ISBN 10: 1-58134-843-6

1. Election (Theology). 2. Predestination. 3. Calvinism. 4. Reformed Church—Doctrines. I. Title.

BT810.3.S76 2006

234—dc22

2006032680

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VP 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07  
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# INTRODUCTION

Deep and complex theological issues are often made more intelligible by a simple, down-to-earth illustration. So let me begin our study of divine election by putting real-life flesh and bones to what strikes many as an abstract and divisive idea.

Jerry and Ed are identical twins, raised by loving Christian parents. As much as was humanly possible, their mother and father refused to play favorites. Both boys were shown the same affection, granted the same privileges, and bore the same responsibilities in the home. They attended the same schools and were virtually equal in athletic ability, popularity among their peers, and grade point average. They were truly twins in temperament, personality, and achievement.

The boys attended church regularly with their parents but showed no interest in religious matters. They would often sit at the back of the church and laugh at the preacher, disdainful of his persistent appeal for repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. As they were alike in so many other respects, they appeared to share an equal contempt for the gospel.

Jerry and Ed had just celebrated their nineteenth birthday and were looking forward to graduating from high school. It was Easter Sunday. They were sitting in the same pew where they had sat for years, listening to the same pastor. But something was different. Nothing unusual, at least in terms of the mundane, natural affairs of life, had occurred to account for what happened on that morning. Neither brother had endured a humiliating experience at school, nor had they been the recipients of excessive praise and honor. By all appearances, it was just another Sunday morning.

But this day, much to his own surprise, Jerry suddenly found himself listening intently to the sermon, while Ed was doodling on the church bulletin, obviously without interest in anything being said. Both brothers had heard countless sermons depicting their sinful and desperate spiritual condition, together with the promise of forgiveness and eternal life through faith in Christ. But not until that Easter Sunday did either of them pay the slightest degree of attention.

Ideas and doctrines that had, until then, sounded silly and archaic, mys-

teriously began to make sense to Jerry. The existence of an infinitely holy God against whom he had rebelled, together with the prospect of eternal death, shattered all his remaining tranquility of soul. He glanced briefly at Ed to see if he was paying attention. Not a chance.

“The pastor’s right,” Jerry silently concluded. “*I am* a sinner. Jesus *is* God in human flesh, and without him I have no hope. Oh, God! Help! Save me! Forgive me! Jesus, you are my only hope. If you had not died in my place and endured the Father’s wrath, I most certainly would have. Forgive me for being so utterly blind to your beauty until now. Oh, Son of God, I embrace you alone. I want to live wholly and utterly for you.”

Jerry struggled to explain to himself what was happening. All he knew was that while listening to what he had heard so many times before, he “heard” it for the very first time. What he had read in the Bible so many times before, he now “saw” as if it had only then appeared. Jesus of Nazareth, who until now held no attraction for him, suddenly seemed altogether lovely and winsome. The conviction that this Jesus alone could deliver him from the spiritual turmoil, grief, and guilt in which he was mired gripped his heart. His soul was, as it were, flooded with wave upon wave of peace and joy as he felt the burden of his sin lifted from his shoulders and placed upon Christ, in whom it vanished from sight. Then the words to that hymn he had so mindlessly sung countless times before rung true to his heart:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay  
Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;  
Thine eye diffused a quick’ning ray  
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;  
My chains fell off, my heart was free;  
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.  
Amazing love! how can it be,  
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?<sup>1</sup>

Ed couldn’t help but notice that his brother was weeping. With a quick jab of his elbow in Jerry’s side, he whispered: “Cut that out! You’re embarrassing me.” But Jerry was unfazed.

What Jerry now found altogether lovely, Ed continued to loathe. Jerry’s unbelief disappeared under a flood of repentance and whole-souled love for Christ. By an act of his will, Jerry embraced the redemptive sufferings of Jesus as his only hope and haven. He willingly repudiated sin and reliance on self,

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Wesley, “And Can It Be That I Should Gain?”

and with joy reposed in Christ. But Ed remained obstinate, and now even more indignant, in his unbelief.

Needless to say, Jerry's experience that morning made for a volatile conversation in the car on the way home. He tried to explain to his brother what had happened, but Ed was incredulous and filled with rage. They were so engrossed in conversation that neither of them saw the pickup truck jump the median into their lane. The crash was head-on and fatal for both.

Instantly, Jerry left this life and entered the bliss of eternal joy in the presence of the Savior whom he had embraced only minutes before in saving faith. Tragically, Ed faced the eternal opposite, separation from the glorious presence of the Lord Jesus Christ as an object, not of love and favor, but of righteous wrath and indignation.

What accounts for the irrevocable and eternal division between these earthly brothers? What made Jerry to differ from Ed? Why did one come to heartfelt and happy faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior while the other persisted in heartfelt hatred and disdain?

That is the question the doctrine of divine election is designed to answer. In the final analysis, when all is said and done, one must attribute Jerry's faith either to Jerry or to God or to some form of cooperative effort on the part of both in which neither takes precedence (or praise) over the other.

I'll be appealing to this hypothetical scenario throughout the course of this book in an attempt to make concrete what otherwise may strike you as abstract. Divine election, as we will shortly see, is profoundly practical and is the only satisfactory explanation for why Jerry was made to differ from Ed.

So let's get started.



# WHAT IS DIVINE ELECTION, AND WHY IS IT SO CONTROVERSIAL?

**D**ivine election is certainly one of the more profound and controversial doctrines in Holy Scripture. To some it is an idea conceived in hell, a tool of Satan to thwart the evangelistic zeal of the church and thus responsible for populating hell with those who otherwise would have been reached with the gospel. To others divine election is the heart and soul of Scripture, the most comforting and reassuring of biblical truths, apart from which grace loses its power and God his glory. To the former, then, election is a primary reason why people are in hell. To the latter, it is the only reason why people are in heaven!

This radical difference of opinion concerning the doctrine of election and predestination is illustrated beautifully (and humorously) in a poem that appeared in *The Continental Journal*, March 11, 1779. It was entitled “On Predestination”:

If all things succeed as already agreed,  
And immutable impulses rule us;  
To preach and to pray, is but time thrown away,  
And our teachers do nothing but fool us.

If we're driven by fate, either this way or that,  
As the carman whips up his horses,  
Then no man can stray—all go the right way,  
As the stars that are fix'd in their courses.

But if by free will, we can go or stand still,  
 As best suits the present occasion;  
 Then fill up the glass, and confirm him an ass  
 That depends upon Predestination.

Two weeks later an answer appeared in the same newspaper:

If an all perfect mind rules over mankind,  
 With infinite wisdom and power;  
 Sure he may decree, and yet the will be free,  
 The deeds and events of each hour.

If scripture affirms in the plainest of terms,  
 The doctrine of Predestination;  
 We ought to believe it, and humbly receive it,  
 As a truth of divine revelation.

If all things advance with the force of mere chance,  
 Or by human free will are directed;  
 To preach and to pray, will be time thrown away,  
 Our teachers may be well rejected.

If men are deprav'd, and to vice so enslav'd,  
 That the heart chuses nothing but evil;  
 Then who goes on still by his own corrupt will,  
 Is driving post haste to the devil.

Then let human pride and vain cavil subside,  
 It is plain to a full demonstration,  
 That he's a wild ass, who over his glass,  
 Dares ridicule Predestination.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the disagreement and most of the animosity concerning this doctrine proceeds from a fundamental misunderstanding of what it means. Our analysis of divine election must, therefore, begin with an attempt to clarify precisely what is at stake and, at the same time, to correct misrepresentations of it.

I'm often asked, "Sam, are you a Calvinist?" Honesty may require me to answer with an immediate, "Yes, I am." But wisdom dictates a more hesitant

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<sup>1</sup> Both of these poems are quoted by Charles W. Akers, "Calvinism and the American Revolution," in *The Heritage of John Calvin: Lectures*, ed. John H. Bratt (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1973), 170-171.

and informed response. “Explain to me what you mean by the label ‘Calvinist,’” I reply, “and I’ll tell you if I am one.”

What comes next is both shocking and disappointing. It is shocking because the response I hear reveals an amazing ignorance of the Reformed tradition and its beliefs. But I’m also disappointed to realize that what I cherish and celebrate as biblical truth suffers from such widespread caricature and misrepresentation.

Often people proceed to define “Calvinism” as an inflexible, fatalistic system of theology, devoid of life and joy, in which God is portrayed as a celestial bully who takes sadistic glee in sending people to hell whether they deserve it or not. Or they describe a perspective that is more concerned with logical coherency than with biblical fidelity. Some argue that Calvinists empty human choices of all moral relevance and reduce men and women to robotic automata. “Needless to say,” I will then reply, “if *that* is what you mean by ‘Calvinist,’ then I most assuredly am *not* one!”

Arminians often run into an equally distressing caricature of their own position. Sadly, many Calvinists think of Arminianism as an intellectually flabby, overly sentimental view of the Christian faith that borders on liberalism, if not universalism. The “God” of Arminianism, I once heard someone sarcastically say, is actually “man” spoken of in a very loud voice. I hope this book will go a long way in dispelling such unkind and terribly misleading caricatures of what people really believe.

## THE POINT OF DISPUTE

Whereas much may and will be said of election in this book, the point of dispute between Calvinists and Arminians is surprisingly simple. No one who believes in the Bible questions the fact that election is taught there. It isn’t the reality of election, or even its source, author, time, or goal that has elicited so much venom among professing Christians. The point of primary dispute, rather, is the *basis* of divine election, that is to say, *why and on what grounds some are elected to salvation and life and others are not*. There are essentially only three options, the first of which is more pagan than Christian.

First, someone might want to argue that God elects those who are good. In this view, election is a debt God is obliged to pay, not a gift he graciously bestows. God elects men and women on the basis of inherent or self-generated righteousness. This is a view consistent with ancient Pelagianism, named after the British monk Pelagius, who became famous in the fifth century due primarily to his dispute with the famous church father Augustine. One would be hard-pressed to find an advocate of this perspective within the professing Christian church today.

Second, others contend that God has elected some who are bad who, notwithstanding their being bad, chose to exercise faith in Jesus Christ. It is on the basis of this *foreseen faith* that God elects them. This is the doctrine of Arminianism, named after the Dutch theologian James Arminius (1560–1609). It has also been called Wesleyanism because of the influence of John Wesley in popularizing this perspective.

Third, there is the view that God has elected some who are bad who, because of their being bad, are not of themselves able to exercise faith in Christ. It is on the basis of his own sovereign good pleasure that God elects them. This is the doctrine of Calvinism, named after the French theologian John Calvin (1509–1564).

We are concerned with the latter two options. The question reduces to this: Does God elect people *because* they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, or does God elect people *in order that* they shall believe in Christ?

### SORTING OUT THE OPTIONS

Jack W. Cottrell, an Arminian, rightly points out that “the Calvinistic mind sees election as bringing about the transition from unbelief to belief, hence making unbelievers the object of election. The Arminian says that this transition is made by a free act of will; election then is an act of God directed toward the believer after the transition has been made.”<sup>2</sup>

Thus the Calvinist says that God elects unbelievers and predestines them to become believers. The Arminian, on the other hand, says that God elects believers and predestines them to become his children.

The issue is not whether there is a cause or basis of God’s choice of people, but whether that cause is some condition (such as faith) fulfilled by an individual acting from free will or the sovereign good pleasure of God. Does God elect a person because that person wants God, or does God elect a person because God wants that person in spite of the fact that the person does *not* want God? We are not disputing whether faith and repentance are necessary for salvation. Indeed, one may even speak of faith and repentance as the *condition* for salvation, in the sense that one must believe and repent in order to be saved. The question, rather, is this: Are faith and repentance produced by free will and thus the *cause* of election, or are they produced by the Holy Spirit and thus the *effect* of election?

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<sup>2</sup>Jack W. Cottrell, “Conditional Election,” in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1975), 72. Perhaps the most cogent recent exposition of Arminianism, particularly in its view of God, providence, and predestination, is Cottrell’s work, *What the Bible Says About God the Ruler* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1984). The article cited, “Conditional Election,” has been revised and included in this more recent work in the chapter “Predestination,” 331-352.

According to Arminianism, election is that act of God whereby he foreordains to eternal life those whom he foresees will respond in faith to the gospel. According to Calvinism, election is that act of God whereby he foreordains to eternal life those who, because of sin, cannot respond in faith to the gospel. Which of these two views is the one the Bible teaches? Or is there a third, mediating option? That is the question I have set myself to answer in this book.

#### ADDENDUM: THE BIBLICAL TERMINOLOGY OF ELECTION

As I pointed out above, there really is no dispute over the reality of divine election, only its basis. Nevertheless, it might prove helpful to see just how pervasive the concept of election is in the Bible. Here I focus exclusively on the New Testament.

1. The verb “to choose” or “to elect” (*eklego*) is found twenty-two times in the New Testament. It is used eight times of Christ’s choosing or electing his disciples (Luke 6:13; John 6:70; 13:18; 15:16 [twice], 19; Acts 1:2, 24). On one occasion Jesus is himself the person chosen (Luke 9:35). Six times it is used in a context that does not pertain to salvation (Luke 10:42; 14:7; Acts 6:5; 15:7, 22, 25). The remaining seven occurrences refer to men and women as the objects of election to eternal life (Mark 13:20; Acts 13:17; 1 Cor. 1:27 [twice], 28; Eph. 1:4; James 2:5).

2. The noun “elect” (*eklektos*) is also used twenty-two times in the New Testament. On three occasions Jesus is the “elect” one (Luke 23:35; 1 Pet. 2:4, 6), and in one text the word refers to angels (1 Tim. 5:21). There is also one passage in which the word has no bearing on salvation (Rom. 16:13). In the seventeen remaining cases the word is used of men and women as God’s “elect,” those chosen to eternal life (Matt. 22:14; 24:22, 24, 31; Mark 13:20, 22, 27; Luke 18:7; Rom. 8:33; Col. 3:12; 2 Tim. 2:10; Titus 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:1; 2:9; 2 John 1, 13; Rev. 17:14).

3. The word which means “election” (*ekloge*) is used seven times, all of which refer to salvation (Acts 9:15; Rom. 9:11; 11:5, 7, 28; 1 Thess. 1:4; 2 Pet. 1:10).

4. The word frequently translated “to predestine” or “to predestinate” (*proorizo*) is found six times in the New Testament. It is used once with reference to Christ’s sufferings (Acts 4:28), once of the predestination of God’s redemptive plan (1 Cor. 2:7, NASB), and four times of the predestination of people to salvation (Rom. 8:29, 30; Eph. 1:5, 11).

5. Another word which means “to choose” (*haireo*) is used three times, only one of which refers to God’s “choosing” people to salvation (2 Thess. 2:13).

6. The word that means “to place, appoint, ordain” (*tasso*) is used eight

times in the New Testament. Only one of these usages (Acts 13:48) is applicable to our study.

7. One other word is often translated “to appoint” or “to determine” (*horizo*), but none of its eight occurrences pertain to the salvation of men and women (Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23; 10:42; 11:29; 17:26, 31; Rom. 1:4; Heb. 4:7).

Clearly the terms used in the New Testament do not of themselves tell us anything definitive about the basis of divine election. One cannot appeal to any alleged intrinsic meaning in a particular Greek word to prove either the Arminian or the Calvinistic perspective. That issue must be determined by the way in which each term is used, as well as other relevant statements in each context.