

THE ONE AND THE MANY IN CHRISTIAN TRADITION  
A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE  
Election in Christ

Key Question: Can Torrance's view of election provide an ecumenical solution to a division of four centuries – the Calvinist-Arminian debate?

First: what do we mean by 'Calvinist' and 'Arminian'?

- 'Federal' Calvinism – particularly the Synod of Dort (1619)
- 'Arminianism' – not semi-Pelagian  
(See Stanglin & McCall, *Jacob Arminius: Theologian of Grace*, OUP, 2012)

In this paper: (1) Arminius and the Remonstrants (2) The Calvinism of Dort (3) T.F. Torrance on Election and Predestination (4) Resolving the issues: the One and the Many

**(A) JACOB ARMINIUS**

- Dutch Reformed theologian – studied in Geneva with Beza
  - 'Federal' Calvinism – the covenants, the decrees
  - Pastor in Amsterdam: 1603 – professor in Leiden – Gomarus
  - *Declaration of Sentiments* (1608) – died 1609
    - Adopts the language of 'decrees'
  - Followers published the *Remonstrance* (1610)
  - Synod of Dort after civil war (1618-19)
  - Begin with Arminius's *Declaration of Sentiments*
    - Nichols translation (1825) - given to me by TFT!
    - trans. Stephen Gunter (Baylor, 2012), p. 135:
- I. The first specific and absolute decree regarding the salvation of sinful humanity: God decreed to appoint his Son, Jesus Christ, as Mediator, Redeemer, Saviour, Priest, and King in order that he might destroy sin by his own death, so that by his own obedience he might obtain salvation lost through disobedience, and by his power communicate this salvation.
  - II. In the second precise and absolute decree, God decided graciously to accept those who repent and believe in Christ, and for Christ's sake and through him to effect the final salvation of penitents and believers who persevere to the end in their faith. Simultaneously, God decreed to leave in sin and under divine wrath all impenitent persons and unbelievers, damning them as alienated from Christ.
  - III. The third divine decree: God decided to administer in a sufficient and efficacious manner the means necessary for repentance and faith – this being accomplished according to divine justice, by which God knows what is proper and becoming both to his mercy and his severity. And all this proceeds according to divine justice, by which God is prepared to adopt whatever his wisdom may prescribe and carry out.
  - IV. From these decrees the fourth proceeds, by which God decreed to save and damn certain particular persons. This decree has its foundation in divine foreknowledge, through which God has known from all eternity those individuals who through the established means of his prevenient grace would come to faith and believe, and through his subsequent sustaining grace would persevere in the faith. Likewise, in divine foreknowledge, God knew those who would not believe and persevere.

**Brief Comments:**

1. Begins with Christ – attempting a more Christocentric doctrine

2. Rejects the supralapsarian doctrine that God created certain individuals in order to damn them
3. But his fourth decree falls back into individualism and distinguishes predestination and foreknowledge (but note 'prevenient grace')
4. Not only individualistic, but still 'double predestination'

## **(B) THE REMONSTRANTS**

- (1) Total Depravity (better termed: 'natural inability')
  - (2) Conditional Election (on condition of faith)
  - (3) Universal Atonement – but not 'universalism'
  - (4) Prevenient Grace – no free will to believe
  - (5) Perseverance?
- Note: Christ no longer central as with Arminius – totally individualistic

In response, Dort decreed: Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, Perseverance of the Saints (TULIP)

### Logical/Historical Development behind Dort

Useful to trace the logic in the historical development of the 'five points' in quasi-syllogisms:

Total Depravity:	All people are sinful people <u>Sinful people are unable to believe</u> ∴ All people are naturally unable to believe
Irresistible Grace:	All who receive grace are saved <u>Only some are saved</u> ∴ Only some receive saving grace
Unconditional Election	Only some receive grace <u>God is the giver of grace</u> ∴ God gives grace only to some – the elect (Augustine)  Re-expressed as 'double predestination' (Calvin)
'Perseverance of the saints' is a corollary of Unconditional Election.	
Limited Atonement	God has willed to save only the elect <u>Christ died to save</u> ∴ Christ died to save only the elect (Beza)

### Comments

1. Both systems totally individualistic (Remonstrants fell away from Arminius's attempt to be Christocentric).
2. The root and starting point of both systems appears to be the Augustinian tradition – particularly the doctrine of original sin.
3. But what initiates the logical development is the concept of irresistible grace.
4. Christ is not the foundation of either system – and his Atonement comes at the end of the logical progression.
5. But note that both parties wanted to give glory to God.

## C. TORRANCE ON PREDESTINATION

‘Predestination in Christ,’ *EvanQ*, 13 (1941), 108-41

‘Universalism or Election,’ *SJT*, 2 (1949), 310-18

See also Myk Habets, ‘Christologically Conditioned Election,’ *Evangelical Calvinism* (2012), 173-99, referring to:

- Introduction to *The School of Faith* (1959), 27-79
- *Conflict and Agreement*, I (1960), 83-88
- *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture* (1980), 127-37
- *Scottish Theology from John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (1996)

‘Predestination in Christ’ (1941)

1. Treated in Reformed theology with decrees and creation, but also *in Christo, propter Christum, per Christum*
2. Must start *in Christo* – not an independent doctrine – personal (the Word), not deterministic
3. Omnipotence to be understood from what God does – rejects a ‘Smith-Jones’ doctrine – ‘pre’ is not temporal - all elected or damned ‘in Christ’
4. ‘Election’ = God’s choice or decision – no determinism – cannot peer into eternity as if it were past time
5. Free will – Luther: *voluntas* and *arbitrium*
6. Personal encounter – unfathomable mystery of rejecting Christ – in Jesus, God becomes an object in the world – One who is both the man who knows and God who is known – In the cross (the first place) there is election and damnation (all humanity damned and elect in Christ). In the personal encounter (the second place) there is election or damnation. Here he moves into developing the Christological shape of the doctrine of election. In Jesus, God as an object within the world, we have both the Object and the Subject of faith. Particularly in the cross, we see ‘election and damnation in the first place’. It is not that a section of humanity is elected to salvation and another section to damnation, but that all humankind are both damned *in Christ* and elect *in Christ*. But ‘in the second place’, at the point of our personal encounter, it is election *or* damnation.
7. The precise relation between the divine decision and the human decision understood from Christology by analogy:
  - Deity and humanity not linked by causally but by the Hypostatic union
  - No fusion between divine and human (determinism) = Eutychianism or Apollinarianism
  - No separation or ‘free will’ – Pelagianism or synergism = Nestorianism

‘A kind of hypostatic union between grace and faith through the Holy Spirit... Faith has no independent existence apart from the initiative of grace, nor is it in any sense the produce of human activity working independently of the Word. It is WE who believe, and we come to believe in a personal encounter with the Word. Faith entails a genuine human decision, but at its heart there is a divine decision, which as it were catches up and makes it what it is, begotten of the Holy Ghost’ (130).

### Habets (2012)

- The *prothesis* of the Father – election ‘Christologically conditioned’
- Union with Christ – universal ‘carnal union’ – but ‘personal union’ through the Spirit
- ‘Forensic captivity’ – rejection of Dort and Westminster
- Universal atonement, but not universalism
- ‘Accidental’ reprobation
- *Sola gratia* – rejects “Arminianism” [!!]

#### **D. RESOLVING THE ISSUES: THE ONE AND THE MANY**

Can Torrance's understanding of election reconcile the two traditions?

- As a preliminary point, Torrance agrees with both on glory of God

But then, following the traditional 'five points' of disagreement:

1. Sin: he agrees with both on human sinfulness ('total depravity') although his hamartiology is undeveloped.
2. Grace: he agrees with both that salvation is 'all of grace' – but rejects individualistic understanding of grace as a medicine in the soul.
3. Election: he agrees with Dort that election is unconditional – but sees it as corporate 'in Christ' (the One) – some of the elect may be lost.
4. Atonement: he agrees with the Arminians (and the whole Church catholic!) that Christ died for all.
5. Perseverance

But most importantly, election must be understood Christocentrically – the election of the One for the Many.

The Calvinist tradition can hold on to (i) salvation by grace (ii) unconditional election (iii) original sin, but would have to surrender (i) irresistible grace (ii) double predestination and (iii) limited atonement (= particular redemption).

The Arminian tradition can hold on to (i) salvation by grace (ii) universal atonement (iii) original sin, but would have to surrender (i) the distinction between predestination and foreknowledge (ii) double predestination (iii) conditional grace.

But the most important point: he rejects the whole shape of this debate determined by an individualistic concept of grace and election. Our starting point must be Christ, not original sin or grace as a force. Our doctrine must be corporate rather than individualistic. We begin not from anthropology but from Christ. The key to this resolution of the conflict lies in Christology – understanding election not individualistically, but corporately – as one aspect of 'the One and the Many'.