

NOTE—This was written as an academic research paper in 2011 for a course in Pastoral and Theological Studies at Reformed Theological Seminary under Professor Howard Griffith. It does not necessarily reflect how I engage with individuals who may disagree, although I trust it can be helpful. It is important to remember that whenever we deal with any difficult doctrinal issue we should be patient and seek to enter into a dialogue over time. Our goal is not to win an argument, but to represent God’s truth in a loving manner.

## The Pastoral Implications of the Doctrine of Election

It is an obvious understatement to say that the doctrine of election has been strongly opposed, challenging as it does the pride and ability of the natural man. The idea that God is sovereign over everything including man’s eternal destiny conflicts with Henley’s bold lines.

“It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate,  
I am the captain of my soul.”<sup>1</sup>

Election has been misunderstood, mischaracterized and even demonized. I was once asked how I could possibly believe such a terrible doctrine. I began my answer by saying simply, “Because the biblical data warrant it.” But before turning to that data it would be helpful to define our terms. Then I will attempt to draw out the pastoral implications of election while contrasting them with corresponding misunderstandings.

### The Doctrine of Election—Some Definitions

1. **Foreordination** “... the most comprehensive word in the whole area of discourse is the term *foreordination*...”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Ernest Henley, *Invictus*, from *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations*, Little, Brown and Company, New York, 1919, p. 829.

The Westminster Confession states, “God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably **ordain whatsoever** comes to pass; yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.”<sup>3</sup> Nothing is excluded from His foreordaining power and purpose.

2. **Predestination** “... is that part of foreordination which deals with the actions of free moral agents, be they angels, men or devils. This doctrine teaches that God foreordains specifically the actions of free moral agents.”<sup>4</sup>

3. **Election** “... is that part of predestination which pertains to the saving acts of free moral agents. Election teaches that God from all eternity predestinated those acts of free moral agents which would lead to their eternal salvation.”<sup>5</sup> (**Reprobation**, on the other hand, pertains to the free acts of moral agents that lead to their damnation. Election is regarded as a positive decree, while reprobation is usually regarded as a permissive decree.)

*Election* has to do with God’s gracious choice of us. *Predestination* has to do with the destination God has in mind regarding our eternal home—a destination he has determined beforehand. The terms are closely related, almost synonymous.

The doctrine itself may be stated as follows: “Election is an act of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen

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<sup>2</sup> John H. Gerstner, *A Predestination Primer*, Alpha Publications, Winona Lake, 1960, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Westminster Confession*, Chapter III, § 1 (emphasis added).

<sup>4</sup> Gerstner, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6.

merit in them, but only because of His sovereign good pleasure.”<sup>6</sup> Since the Synod of Dordt in the early 17th Century, it has often been referred to as *unconditional* election, and is one of the so-called five points of Calvinism. The adjective *unconditional* emphasizes the gratuitous nature of God’s choice.

The teaching of election finds its basis in the decree of God who, because purposeful in all He does, foreordains everything that comes to pass. A subset of His foreordination is the electing grace that saves those whom He freely chooses. God’s power and purpose is taught throughout the Bible. As Warfield puts it, “God could not be thought of otherwise than as the free determiner of all that comes to pass in the world which is the product of His creative act; the doctrine of Providence which is spread over the pages of the Old Testament fully bears out this expectation.”<sup>7</sup> And of course, the same is true of the NT.

### **Biblical Testimony**

Election is clearly taught in Scripture. The assurance that comes with it must be sought from Scripture. To try to ground this doctrine elsewhere is to invite “anguish of conscience.”<sup>8</sup>

“For just as those engulf themselves in a deadly abyss who, to make their election more certain, investigate God’s eternal plan apart from his Word, so those who rightly and duly examine it as it is contained in his Word reap the inestimable fruit of comfort. Let this, therefore, be the way of our inquiry: to begin with God’s call and to end with it.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1994, p. 670.

<sup>7</sup> B.B. Warfield, *Bible Doctrines*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1929, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, Vol. 2, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1960, p. 969.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Here then, is a small sampling of the Scriptural support for God's unconditional choice in election:

1. With regard to Israel, Deuteronomy 7.7-8. "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt."
2. Jesus' choice of his disciples in John 15.16. "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit ..."
3. Acts 13.48 indicates God's sovereign choice in election enabled the Gentiles in Antioch of Pisidia to believe Paul's preaching. "And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed (ordained) to eternal life believed."
4. Romans 8.29 states, "For those whom he (God) foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn of many brothers."
5. Romans 9.11-13, "Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call—she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.' As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'"

6. Ephesians 1.4-5, "... even as he (God, the Father) chose us in him (Christ) before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will." How striking that his choosing of us occurred before the foundation (creation) of the world. This clearly shows that we could have nothing to do with his choice since we did not yet exist.

### **Pastoral Implications of Election**

The pastoral implications of this election are many since it is but one part of a system of doctrine that hangs together both logically and biblically.

#### **Inability And Election**

If this doctrine is true, then it necessarily follows that all mankind by nature are bound in sin and are unable to do anything to merit salvation. Indeed, Paul presents us all as dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2.1) whom God made ... "alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved ..." (2.5). There was nothing we could do to save ourselves or in the least way contribute to our salvation. The effect of this promotes humility in man as well as honor and glory for God, who is worthy of all praise in saving us.

Some protest that this destroys a man's free will and makes him a puppet subject to the whims of a remote and arbitrary deity (rather more like Islam). Such a protest assumes a too sanguine view of human freedom and ability. Jesus said, "No man

can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6.44). We are not puppets, but neither do we have an absolute free will.

Similar to this is the mischaracterization that election promotes fatalism because it denies the possibility of responsible human actions, leaving us with a mechanistic, impersonal universe. But this confuses the biblical doctrine of election with philosophical hard-determinism. The Bible paints a much different picture. Our God is personal and purposeful. He chose us in love and predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of his will (Ephesians 1.4-5).

Admittedly, we encounter mystery here. Just how God’s sovereign choice in election and man’s responsible decisions fit together we cannot say. But why pit them against each other? Scripture never does. They are complementary, not opposed. We know that parallel lines, by definition, never intersect. Consider a long, straight stretch of railroad track as far as the eye can see. We know the rails never intersect. But at the vanishing point on the horizon, they *do* seem to come together. C.H. Spurgeon in this way illustrated the mystery of human and divine interaction and then commented that the area between the rails provided a convenient space to bow and worship the mighty God in whom all mystery resides. Jesus told his disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you ...” (John 15.16). Well, they *had* chosen him. But Jesus’ choice of them was prior. Somehow it fits together.

The Bible insists that God is sovereign, determining all things that come to pass. It also insists that our choices are significant and that we are responsible for the actions we take. “The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom he

is betrayed!” (Matthew 26.24) The upshot of all of this is that we are entirely dependent upon God for our salvation.

### **God’s Grace is Magnified In Election**

God’s electing grace must issue forth in the call that brings us to life, if we are to be saved. It is only in retrospect and through study of Scripture that we come to this realization, however. Spurgeon says it well:

“One weeknight, when I was sitting in the house of God, I was not thinking much about the preacher’s sermon, for I did not believe it. The thought struck me, ‘*How did you come to be a Christian?*’ I sought the Lord. ‘*But how did you come to seek the Lord?*’ The truth flashed across my mind in a moment—I should not have sought him unless there had been some previous influence in my mind to make me seek him. I prayed, thought I, but then I asked myself, ‘*How came I to pray?*’ I was induced to pray by reading the Scriptures. ‘*How came I to read the Scriptures?*’ I did read them, but what led me to do so? Then, in a moment, I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, and that he was the Author of my faith, and so the whole doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine I have not departed to this day, and I desire to make this my constant confession, ‘I ascribe my change wholly to God.’”<sup>10</sup>

God’s grace is magnified in election. Grace is often described as God’s unmerited favor and that is certainly true. But we not only do *not* merit God’s favor, we merit his wrath. We are not merely undeserving, we are ill-deserving. Studying the doctrine of election will produce much praise and thanksgiving for it magnifies the grace of God. This connection between grace and election is put well by Warfield. “It is this, his meaning to save us by his grace *before he actually does so*, which we call ‘election.’

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1962, p. 164-5.

Election, we thus see, is but the first moving of God's grace looking to our salvation; and therefore Paul calls it 'the election of grace'" (Romans 11.5; my italics).<sup>11</sup>

It is the unconditional nature of this electing grace that leaves us in humble adoration. Spurgeon again,

"I believe in the doctrine of election, because I am quite certain that, if God had not chosen me, I never should have chosen him; and I am sure he chose me before I was born, or else he never would have chosen me afterwards; and he must have elected me for reasons unknown to me, for I never could find any reason in myself why he should have looked on me with special love."

There is no contribution we can make to our salvation. It is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Election before the foundation of the world is the prologue to this seamless salvation. "... he chose us in him (Christ) ..." (Ephesians 1.4). It is all of grace and it is all in Christ. *He* is the one who merits our salvation. Everything we have in salvation we have in union with Christ. Neither is there anything we can do to maintain it. We are in Christ by grace and we remain in him by grace. Contrast this with the Arminian position that requires some work on our part to be saved. It may seem as little as 'deciding for Christ.' But that decision—our own believing—is, in effect, "... the decisive factor which actually saves us.... What we say [then] comes to this—that Christ saves us with our help; and what that means, when one thinks it out is this—that we save ourselves with Christ's help."<sup>12</sup>

Of course, this robs God of glory. The Reformed position, on the other hand, honors and glorifies the God of grace as the author, maintainer and finisher of salvation.

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<sup>11</sup> B.B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings, Vol. I*, P & R Publishing, Phillipsburg, 1970, p. 289.

<sup>12</sup> J.I Packer, Introduction to John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1967, p. 14.

## God Chose Us to be Holy and Blameless

Why did God choose us? What was his purpose? We have already referred to purposefulness as a fundamental fact about our God. Scripture is very clear on God's purpose in choosing us.

Ephesians 1.4 tells us that the Father "... chose us in him (Christ) before the foundation of the world, *that we should be holy and blameless before him.*" Again, in Warfield's words, "We are not chosen because we are good; we are chosen that we may be good. That is precisely what we are elected to—goodness, holiness."<sup>13</sup> Paul states in Romans 8.29 that we have been predestined to this end—that we might be conformed to the image of God's Son. And when Peter exhorts his readers to "... make your calling and election sure ..." (2 Peter 1.10) he does so by encouraging them to diligence in practicing qualities which can only be described as the attributes of a holy life—faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, godliness, brotherly affection and love (2 Peter 1.5-7).

How ironic that one of the criticisms leveled against the doctrine of election is that it engenders indolence in Christian living. It certainly did not have that effect on Paul. "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal joy" (2 Timothy 2.8-10). Why would he go through all that trouble for the elect (of which he was one)? Because far

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<sup>13</sup> Warfield, *op. cit.*, p. 291.

from promoting laziness, a proper understanding of election spurs the believer on to endure hardship in service to God. After telling the Ephesians that they were saved by grace through faith, he informs them that God has prepared *beforehand* good works for them to walk in (Ephesians 2.10). This foreordination of good works is designed to bring glory to God and to perfect the believer in holiness and the fear of God.

Notice also the connection between God's choice in election and sanctification through the Spirit in the following text: "But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord because God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief of the truth" (2 Thessalonians 2.13). Our election is inseparable from God's gracious purpose in making us holy.

### **Comfort and Assurance in Salvation**

Ephesians 1.5 tells us that the Father predestined us in love for adoption through Jesus Christ. The glorious doctrine of adoption as sons and daughters of God is said here to be wrapped up in God's electing grace. How personal, kind and gracious of our heavenly Father! As his children, he always has our best interests in mind. One of the most comforting passages in the Bible is Romans 8.28-30. He works all things together for our good, "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. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified." From the electing grace of the distant past to the glorifying grace of the distant future, the Father cares for his children. In

what may be seen as an extended commentary on this passage, the Genesis narrative of Joseph reveals the superintending care of our heavenly Father in the most trying circumstances. Even the word “foreknew” (Romans 8.29) speaks of the intimacy and particular love with which our Father loves us.

But it may be argued that this very particularity is scandalous. Doesn't this doctrine arbitrarily limit the atonement to a favored few? And is this not unfair? This is but another mischaracterization that disappears under closer examination. In the TULIP acrostic, *Limited Atonement* follows *Unconditional Election* and is a logical corollary. The word “limited” is acknowledged even by the Reformed as unhelpful since it seems to indicate a deficiency in the cross work of Christ. But this is not the case. In fact, every theological system except universalism limits the effect of the atonement in some way.

Once again, Spurgeon says it well:

“We are often told that we limit the atonement of Christ, because we say that Christ has not made a satisfaction for all men, or all men would be saved. Now, our reply to this is, that, on the other hand, our opponents limit it: we do not. The Arminians say, Christ died for all men. Ask them what they mean by it. Did Christ die so as to secure the salvation of all men? They say, “No, certainly not.” We ask them the next question—Did Christ die so as to secure the salvation of any man in particular? They answer “No.” They are obliged to admit this if they are consistent. They say “No, Christ has died that any man may be saved if”—and then follow certain conditions of salvation. Now, who is it that limits the death of Christ? Why, you. You say that Christ did not die so as infallibly to secure the salvation of anybody. We beg your pardon, when you say we limit Christ's death; we say, “No, my dear sir, it is you that do it.” We say Christ so died that he infallibly secured the salvation of a multitude that no man can number, who through Christ's death not only may be saved, but are saved, must be saved and cannot by any possibility run the hazard of

being anything but saved. You are welcome to your atonement; you may keep it. We will never renounce ours for the sake of it.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Encouragement in Evangelism**

Knowing that God has elected certain ones to salvation in Christ is an encouragement to evangelism. Their coming to Christ is a certainty. “... And as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.” (Acts 13.48b) The word order is significant. The faith of the Antiochenes was the result of their election, not vice versa.

And when Paul sat discouraged in Corinth, the Lord said to him in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people” (Acts 18.9-10). At the time this word came from the Lord, it was not evident who these people were. But through Paul’s preaching of the gospel, an effectual call went out to them and with grace irresistible they were drawn to faith in Jesus Christ. How encouraging it is to know that God will have a people from every kindred, tribe and tongue. What a motivation to proclaim the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection!

It is a mischaracterization to say that the doctrine of election kills the evangelistic impulse. True, there has been a hyper-Calvinism that misconstrues election and thinks that God will save without evident means. But the One who ordains the end also ordains the means. Hyper-Calvinism is as much an error as Arminianism.

### **The Goal of God’s Purposes in All Things, Including Election and Reprobation:**

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<sup>14</sup> Referenced by Packer, op. cit., p. 14.

## His Glory

Now we must pan the camera back to take in a wider view of this doctrine. In a tangential manner we briefly alluded to God's glory as the goal of all his works. But more must be said. As Paul finishes his discussion of God's electing purpose for Israel, he finds himself at a loss for words. "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (Romans 11.33-36).

"The ultimate goal of all God's works indeed is, and has to be, his glory; but having said this we have not yet said a word about the *manner* in which his glory will shine forth. This manner has been determined by his will, and although God also had his wise and holy reasons for it, we cannot say why he chose precisely this means and not another, why he planned the destruction of many and not the salvation of all."<sup>15</sup>

If God has elected some to salvation in Christ (even a multitude that no man can number) what may be said of the rest of mankind? Opponents of election have often followed John Wesley's plan of attack. His sermon *Free Grace*, in which he opposed the doctrine of predestination, asserted with great force that if predestination as understood by Calvinists be true, so must reprobation be parallel to it in every respect. He then drew out supposed logical implications, such as making all preaching unnecessary, destroying zeal for good works, making the gospel itself needless. And

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<sup>15</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2004, p. 386.

most alarming of all, declaring that predestination has God doing the devil's work for him. This sermon contained his famous 'apostrophe to the devil'—that if predestination was true, then the devil was a fool for all his nefarious work, since God himself was doing it for him.<sup>16</sup>

It is certainly true that reprobation is a difficult doctrine. What can be said about it? Bavinck's question is to the point:

“Why did God, knowing everything in advance, create humans with the capacity to fall, and why did he not prevent the fall? Why did he allow all humans to fall in the fall of one person? Why does he not have the gospel preached to all humans, and why does he not bestow faith on all? In short, if God foreknows a thing and permits it, he does that either willingly or unwillingly. The latter is impossible. Accordingly, only the former is a real option: God's permission is efficacious, an act of his will.”<sup>17</sup>

Paul uses Pharaoh as an example of one whom God hardened, in line with his purpose. “So then, he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.” (Romans 9.18) And there are other texts that teach the same. For example, “So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,’ and ‘A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.’ They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.” (1 Peter 2.7-8) But the Bible does not speak of election and reprobation in the same manner.

The Westminster Confession Chapter 3, Articles 5 and 7 effectively summarizes the Bible's teaching:

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<sup>16</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Vol. 1, Cornerstone Books, Westchester, IL, 1970, p. 310.

<sup>17</sup> Bavinck, op. cit., p. 387.

“Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, had chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith, or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace.” (WCF 3.5)

“The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy, as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, **to pass by**; and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath **for their sin**, to the praise of his glorious justice.” (WCF 3.7, emphasis added)

A comparison of these two articles shows that in some ways election and reprobation are similar. They both issue from God’s eternal counsel and they both have God’s glory as their goal. But there are important differences. The Confession speaks of the reprobate as being “passed by” and notes that their destiny of dishonor and wrath is due to “their sin.” Those predestinated to life, on the other hand, were so from before the foundation of the world and no works of any kind are mentioned as the ground of their election, but rather God’s “mere free grace and love.” The Canons of Dordt, 1.15, describe the reprobate as those who are left in their misery “... not only for their unbelief but also for all their other sins.”

In Romans 9 Paul says that God’s grace in salvation is completely due to his mercy, without condition, entirely gratuitous. But with regard to the reprobate, they are so because of their sin and unbelief. God saves, out of the mass of fallen humanity, a multitude that no man can number, but passes by others in his inscrutable wisdom. If we imagine that mankind is somehow morally neutral, this seems totally unfair. But that is *not* the case. We are all worthy of judgment. The fact that God saves any should

surprise us. “The elect receive mercy. The non-elect receive justice. But no one receives injustice at the hands of God.”<sup>18</sup>

The doctrine of reprobation should make us marvel at God’s grace in election. But it should have no effect on our evangelistic ministry as Wesley contended. Why? *Because we do not know who they are.* God has wisely kept his own counsel on this matter. Undoubtedly, most in the early church assumed that Saul of Tarsus was not among the elect of God. But God’s amazing grace saved even Saul. We should assume everyone still breathing is a candidate for new life in Christ.

The pastoral implications radiating from the doctrine of election are many. It is a family doctrine, which must be taught carefully to God’s people. It is easy to misunderstand since it so conflicts with the mind of the natural man. It should be taught patiently, giving people time to consider it, to ask questions. Everyone who wishes to grow in the knowledge of God must grapple with this. It attacks our pride. As Paul put it, when a supposed opponent questions God as arbitrary, “But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? ... Has the potter no right over the clay to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use?” (Romans 9.20-21). There comes a point at which arguing about God’s ways with his creatures is impertinent. Job found this out. Let us learn from him.

As Bavinck says, it is incorrect to describe the ultimate end of all things as the revelation of God’s mercy in the elect and of his justice in the lost.<sup>19</sup> Election is an important part, but only one part of the glory which shall be seen at the consummation

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<sup>18</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Chosen By God*, Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, IL, 1986, p. 26.

<sup>19</sup> Bavinck, op. cit., p. 389.

of God's plan. He will sum all things up *in* Christ, and shall subject all things *to* Christ and then shall receive all things *from* Christ, that God may be all in all. Amen.

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