5

"CHOSEN BY GRACE"

Reconsidering the Doctrine of Predestination

Margit Ernst-Habib

> You seem to be expecting to go to some parlor *away up* somewhere, and when the wicked have been burnt, you are coming back to walk in triumph over their ashes—this is to be your New Jerusalem!! Now I can't see anything so very *nice* in that, coming back to such a *muss* as that will be, a world covered with the ashes of the wicked! Besides, if the Lord comes and burns—as you say he will—I am not going away; *I* am going to stay here and *stand the fire,* like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego! And Jesus will walk with me through the fire, and keep me from harm. Nothing belonging to God can burn, any more than God himself; such shall have no need to go away to escape the fire! No, *I* shall remain. Do you tell me that God's children *can't stand fire*?
>
> —Sojourner Truth

Sojourner Truth (1797–1883), the abolitionist, preacher, and former slave, reacts with these strong words, barely disguising her disgust, to a sermon she heard at a meeting of the Second Advent movement. This movement, a Protestant group founded in 1863, proclaimed the imminence of the second coming of Christ, at which Christ will divide the human race into those "elect" who will be saved and those "wicked" who will burn. Though it certainly has its own characteristic emphases, this preaching in some ways reflects a broader understanding during Truth's time of what will happen to the "elect" and the "damned" when Christ returns; Truth might as well have spoken to numerous other Christian communities, including churches of the Reformed tradition. Indeed, with these drastic words, she summarizes a common understanding of her time, but not of her time only. This idea seems to be actually gaining immense popularity today, if the success of books such as the Left Behind Series is any indication. Even today, a good many people here in the United States might assume that Christian churches are teaching a similar interpretation of what happens "at the end of time" and react in a likewise disgusted way, joining Sojourner Truth's exclamation, "I can't see anything so very *nice* in that!"

In churches of the Reformed tradition (and beyond) this discussion is usually linked with the term predestination or the term election. But what

exactly is it that the doctrine of predestination/election teaches? Is there just one doctrine of predestination, or are there differing teachings subsumed under this name? And do these teachings warrant those disgusted reactions? Before discussing the topic of predestination and its varying interpretations, it might be helpful to provide one working definition of a traditional understanding of predestination and election—keeping in mind that there are actually as many different definitions and understandings of predestination as theologians who have worked with this doctrine. One way to briefly summarize predestination is the following:

> Some Christian theologians, particularly in the Reformed tradition, have seen [predestination] as indicating God's eternal decree by which all creatures are foreordained to eternal life or death. It may also be used synonymously with "election" and indicates God's gracious initiation of salvation for those who believe in Jesus Christ.[1]

Accordingly, double predestination may be defined as "the term for the view that God both predestines or elects some to salvation and condemns others to damnation, both by eternal decrees."[2] In other words, according to this definition, God has decided from the beginning who will be saved, not based on the works of the believer, but out of God's grace. Emphasizing God's grace, one could also define election as God's gracious and irreversible gift and promise of salvation: "You shall be my people and I shall be your God" (Ezek. 36:28).

Theologians did not come up with this teaching "out of the blue" but found the roots for it in Scripture. A major root for predestination and election is to be found in the First Testament in the central event of Sinai: God chooses Israel to be God's people. There are also Second Testament passages that have been of great importance to theologians: "God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4), and "those whom he [God] predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified" (Rom. 8:30), to name but two of the central passages for any discussion of predestination.

It is of great importance to note what the term "predestination," both in classical and contemporary theology, does *not* mean: Predestination is "not to be confused with providence, that is, God's governance of all things, nor with fate or philosophical determinism."[3] Predestination does not mean predetermination, that everything in life, good as well as bad, is programmed, and human beings must simply accept their "fate" in passive obedience. Misunderstanding predestination is, of course, not a recent phenomenon; in 1940 Pierre Maury remarked, "Outside the church, there are many more in number who protest violently against predestination and heap up arguments against it; for they see in it only a sort of fatalism, or some other kind of philosophical position."[4] And yet, even with this

misunderstanding removed, the doctrine of predestination still seems to carry with it the undertone of human passivity and an arbitrary and (for some) cruel divine decision. This undertone seems to influence strongly the reactions of many, if not most, contemporary Christians. Therefore, the next part of this chapter will present a brief discussion of major arguments against the doctrine of predestination. Following this discussion, I will suggest a rereading of three classical understandings of predestination/election, namely, those of Augustine, Calvin, and Barth, in search of insights that might be helpful for feminist and womanist theologies within (and maybe beyond) the Reformed tradition. The final part of this chapter will summarize these insights and findings and relate them to some key issues in feminist and womanist theology.

THE TROUBLE WITH PREDESTINATION

In many churches in the United States, the doctrine of predestination, or rather various interpretations and misinterpretations of it, leaves people decidedly uncomfortable, if not outright repelled. This seems to be a peculiarly North American problem; predestination/election is not as much of an issue in many other churches of the Reformed tradition. For example, contemporary confessional statements from around the world rarely discuss the doctrine of predestination. Instead, for the most part, these confessions place the doctrine of election in the context of the church, following the tradition set by the Heidelberg Catechism.[5]

Predestination is usually under attack from different directions, and feminist theologians have shared these concerns and added their own questions. Main arguments against traditional understandings and misunderstandings of predestination often center around one or more of the following issues: (1) the focus on individuals and their "private" salvation; (2) the tendency to concentrate on the "afterlife" while omitting our life here and now, (3) the limited character of human agency with respect to salvation; and, finally, (4) the implicit or explicit danger of an exclusive and hierarchical understanding of the chosen ones.

The first set of main arguments against the doctrine of predestination/election deals with the issue of individualism. Though the biblical understanding of predestination has to do with the "chosen people," it is often understood in an individualistic manner: Am *I* saved? Do *I* belong to the number of the elect? How do *I* know that I am going to heaven? The good news of God's promise to God's people ("You shall be my people and I shall be your God") has been reduced to something private, something I have to achieve for and by myself. This individualistic attitude can produce people who don't care much about community, not even the Christian community,

since all they worry about is their own individual salvation. Thus it may produce proud people, who are sure they are saved, but it may also produce anxious, fearful persons who look at themselves for a confirmation of their chosenness—and may not find it. One could ask, what role do Christ and Christ's church play when each believer is alone responsible for her or his own salvation? Sojourner Truth responds to the preaching of the Second Advent movement with her faith in Jesus, who "will walk with me through the fire and keep me from harm"; but traditional (mis)understandings of predestination have often neglected the central role of Christ and Christ's community.

Second, common understandings of predestination tend to deal with a notion of salvation that focuses primarily on the afterlife—the question "Do I belong to the chosen ones?" is equated with "Will I go to heaven after I die?" Here God's gift and promise of salvation (which is, as I have indicated above, one way to understand predestination) is not discussed as something important for the Christian life here and now, as a transformative act of God's grace, but as a kind of "afterlife insurance" to be claimed when we die. Feminist and womanist theologies, on the other hand, emphasize the life-transforming power of God's unmerited grace, and are in general not very much interested in speculation about eternal life and immortality.[6] Rosemary Radford Ruether, for example, once asked pointedly, "Does feminism have a stake in immortality? . . . Is the idea of immortality the expression of a male individualism and abstraction from real-life processes that feminist consciousness should reject?"[7] Therefore, eschatology, or the study of the "last things" (the second coming of Christ and the last judgment), is not discussed in feminist discourse in terms of "last" things as if they had no relation to the "present" things. On the contrary, Christian hope is rediscovered as a community-building and radicalizing impulse,[8] and a reformulated understanding of predestination would have to take this critique into consideration.

A third general concern with respect to the traditional teaching of predestination contends that it limits human agency since the final decision of who is "in" and who is "out" is solely God's sovereign decision, with human beings contributing nothing to it. Humans appear to become mere puppets with respect to their salvation. This argument seems to hit a nerve especially among many North American Christians for whom free will appears to be a cornerstone of human nature and identity. I have rarely met a student or church member belonging to the Reformed tradition who does not wholeheartedly believe in the free will of all human beings and who is not taken aback when learning that the Reformed tradition indeed teaches that the human will is *not* free—at least with respect to the ability not to sin. There is almost no other issue that seems to me (as a native German) to be so telling of the particular contextual character of piety in the United

States as the understanding of freedom in general and free will in particular. The traditional teaching of predestination seems to work against all those deep-rooted convictions and beliefs.

Feminist and womanist theologians add their own particular concerns with respect to the issue of "agency." Being in control of one's own life, body, and mind is a general concern of our contemporary society, but it is of particular importance for women who have been denied this control over much of history and are, in fact, still denied this control in many places both outside and inside the rich Northern Hemisphere. Feminist and womanist ethics thus claim the importance of understanding women as both autonomous and relational subjects; and in this context, "agency" has become something like a keyword of feminist theology.[9] "Agency" is understood as a personal and political reality at the same time: "a capacity for the transformation of selves in, through, and for the transformation of communities."[10] Traditional teachings of predestination explain that God is the only one to decide about our salvation and that nothing we do will make any difference—is God not portrayed here like an arbitrarily deciding Heavenly King, denying us any form of agency? Does this doctrine teach what women have been told for centuries, namely, that they do not have the power to change anything important in their lives and in the life of their communities?

Kathryn Tanner, arguing that Christian beliefs have a direct influence on attitudes and actions of the believer, lists possible negative reactions that might emerge from a belief in predestination with its limited human agency:

> Terror over the inefficacy of the works one had counted on to secure one's righteousness before God; . . . rage against an arbitrary and potentially cruel fate; . . . anxiety over whether one has really been saved in Christ; . . . quietistic resignation in the face of a destiny one cannot influence; . . . prideful disdain for the "ungodly" lives of people whom God has not chosen; . . . rigid behavioral requirements for church membership as indications of election, and moral scrupulosity, therefore, about any failure to abide by such norms.[11]

How are feminist and womanist theologians supposed to react when confronted with what seems to be the exact opposite of agency concerning their salvation? One important question is therefore whether the doctrine of election can have liberating character at all, or whether it is more likely that this teaching leads to passivity and desperation.

Finally, some people argue, not unlike Sojourner Truth, that any interpretation of predestination is per se exclusive, limiting God's grace in Jesus Christ to a number of elect while the rest of humanity is "damned," forever barred from salvation. In effect, this position argues that the Good

News of the gospel is turned into bad news for some; this doctrine is said to represent "pathetic inhumanity."[12] This has been a major argument against predestination throughout the whole history of the church, but it gains a special momentum in a time challenged (and sometimes frightened) by pluralism, in which the issue of inclusiveness has emerged as one of the central concerns.

Even though they have not yet developed a comprehensive analysis or reformulation of the doctrine of predestination, some feminist theologians following this line of thought clearly want to question those understandings of predestination that represent a "hierarchical model of privilege that sets some persons outside of God's hospitality."[13] Letty Russell, for example, identifies a close relationship of patriarchy and an (idolatrous) understanding of election, which leads to a deformation of election that "combines the idea that election is a free gift of God's grace with the idea that election is a form of privilege that justifies the exclusion and domination of others."[14] The Jewish feminist theologian Judith Plaskow has critiqued the concept of election and chosenness with particular respect to its understanding of difference in a similar way:

> It is the notion of chosenness that is the chief expression of hierarchical separation and therefore the most important focus for discussion. . . . If Jewish feminism is to articulate a model of community in which difference is acknowledged without being hierarchalized, it will have to engage the traditional Jewish understanding of difference by rejecting the idea of chosenness without at the same time denying the distinctiveness of Israel as a religious community.[15]

According to Plaskow, one of the possible immediate and destructive consequences of the (misinterpreted) idea of chosenness, translated into the realm of politics, can be seen in the wide-ranging discrimination against Palestinians in the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and in the State of Israel (i.e., the "non-chosen non-Jewish"): "The recent history of the religious right in Israel would seem to suggest that belief in chosenness can go hand in hand with the worst idolatry of the state and the willingness to justify any sort of abuse of the non-Jewish Other."[16]

With all these questions, warnings, objections, and potentially harmful understandings, why should a feminist theologian be interested in this subject? Why should a feminist theologian, even one within the Reformed tradition or in dialogue with it, spend time and energy re-discovering this doctrine, which seems to work against some of her core concerns? Why not deposit it on the dumping ground of those theological doctrines that have proved to be destructive not only for women but for all people who do not fit into the definition of the "chosen race" because of their gender, race, class, or sexual orientation? Why not abandon the subject of predestination

altogether, when it includes the discussion of God's "horrible decree,"[17] as even Calvin himself put it? Why not simply turn to the life-affirming and transforming good news of God's grace in Christ?

One obvious reason would be that the doctrine of predestination has been of such great importance to the Reformed tradition; it has even been called "a special mark of Reformed theology."[18] Yet there is more. Over the past few years, I have come to see that a new look at the doctrine of election can help us to get to the core of the good news (though we will have to clear away a load of obstacles on the road!). It can lead us away from misunderstanding election as the neutral predecision of an omnipotent but basically uncaring and arbitrary God to understanding anew "the divine Yes spoken in advance."[19] The doctrine of election can illustrate to us the gift of God's extensive grace, as Letty Russell observes:

> In the history of the church, the doctrine of election points to the need for identity as human beings in the world. Those who are nobody affirm their own self-worth as children of God by claiming that God has chosen them and enabled them to live faithfully. In this sense, to be chosen of God is to be granted full human identity and worth as a gift of God's love. No wonder not only the tribes of Israel, and the nobodies of the early church, but also those in every culture who have been considered less than human, or outcasts, have found reassurance that God has chosen them as covenant partners. In this aspect the idea of election enables communities to resist racism and other forms of oppression.[20]

It is exactly this double aspect of reassurance and empowerment for the marginalized that causes me to take a fresh look at the doctrine of election, hoping to find good news for today's church and world.

FROM AUGUSTINE TO BARTH: REREADING TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF PREDESTINATION

As Letty Russell has pointed out, the doctrine of predestination needs to be read in its context. Even though this teaching might sound "horrible" to us when we first encounter it, we shall not get to a deeper understanding of it as long as we fail to see it in relation to the author's context and work. That is why I would like to propose a rereading of the classical tradition of the doctrine of predestination, beginning with Augustine. Contrary to popular opinion, neither Calvin nor Calvinism in general is to be "blamed" for inventing the doctrine of predestination. Instead, Calvin is only one in a long line of theologians who offer interpretations of God's election. As many other theologians had done before him, Calvin based his doctrine primarily on Augustine's interpretation of Paul.

Augustine

Though Augustine (354–430) was not the first one to deal with predestinarian thoughts,[21] his understanding proved to be especially influential in the Western discussion of predestination. Although his radical understanding of predestination and irresistible grace was not widely taken up in the church, and was even rejected at the Council of Orange in 529, its importance commands us to take a closer look at his teaching and context. Seeing Augustine's teaching in context means first of all recognizing that his doctrine of predestination can be rightly understood only as a continuation of his already-developed doctrine of grace, which he articulated in contradistinction to the British monk Pelagius. Pelagius argued that since God holds us responsible for our sins, we must have the power to stop sinning, to do good works, and to obey the law. Otherwise God would be making a highly unfair demand on us: God would not command what we cannot do! He agreed that human beings need God's help in leading a sinless life, up to a certain degree. But he also believed that humans have to make the first step if they want to receive it. What Pelagius proclaimed was basically his version of "God helps those who help themselves," and his message resembles closely a popular contemporary preaching style especially favored by a certain kind of evangelical TV preacher. (To a non-American hearer, this message often sounds very much like a religious version of the "American Dream," where everything is possible for those who only work hard enough.)

Augustine was profoundly disconcerted by Pelagius's view, not because he thought that this was simply a heresy, but because of the effects this teaching would have on Christians. His motivation for rejecting Pelagius was a deep pastoral concern. Based on his own experience, he asks how sinful human beings are able to turn away from their sin and turn to God, when sin so binds the human will that they are not able to take even the first step—here, the doctrine of original sin was born. For Augustine, Pelagius's teaching was not good news. Quite the opposite, he was convinced that *everybody* would be damned if Pelagius were right. No, he argued, God does not help those who help themselves, precisely because human beings are *not* able to help themselves. God helps those who can*not* help themselves, who are desperate and discouraged:

> First we had to be persuaded how much God loved us, in case out of sheer despair we lacked the courage to reach up to him. Also we had to be shown what sort of people we are that he loves, in case we should take pride in our own worth, and so bounce even further away from him and sink even more under our own strength.[22]

Only after God reaches out to us and lovingly persuades and encourages us to trust in God's grace can we turn away from sin and be encouraged to

reach up to God. This is God's gracious love at work in human beings, that in knowing our sin we already know that we are forgiven.

Though in our day Augustine has been made responsible for almost everything that went wrong in theology, especially in relation to his understanding of original sin, the time has come to explore how Augustine might actually be helpful for a liberating theology. Especially for women who suffer from a paralysis of guilt and feelings of unworthiness,[23] Augustine's emphasis on God's prevenient grace might actually be a healing experience, a "route to liberation":

> Having identified . . . his sins, [Augustine's] strategy was to place all reliance on the grace of God, whose mercy he believed is greater than our own self-judgment. Augustine, in his rejection of the doctrines of Pelagianism, refused to accept the pessimistic and uncompassionate idealism, which held each individual personally responsible for all their moral failures. His own teaching about Original Sin, whatever its imperfections, was far less individualistic for it portrayed our sinful nature as something corporate and inherited, thus making it in some sense a collective human responsibility rather than the cause of despair for the solitary individual sinner.[24] . . . Paradoxically, it is the realization that we are not God, that we are subject to sin and cannot be the final judge of ourselves that has the power to liberate us from the paralysis of guilt and to regenerate hope.[25]

This is one of Augustine's core concerns (though I admit that he often makes it quite hard for us to see): uplifting sinners and assuring them of God's unfailing grace. And this grace is not a mere declaration of pardon, a purely forensic forgiveness of sins; it is the gift of God's grace that transforms the recipient: "This grace not only makes us know what we should do, but also makes us do what we know; it not only makes us believe what we should love, but makes us love what we believe. . . . In that way [God] not merely reveals the truth, but also imparts love."[26]

Out of this emphasis on God's unmerited grace that transforms the minds and hearts of those who cannot help themselves emerges Augustine's interpretation of predestination. God saves in Jesus Christ, who suffered and died for us. Nothing we can do can revoke this salvation because it is based exclusively on God's eternal decision. Sojourner Truth said, "Nothing belonging to God can burn, any more than God himself," and, interestingly, Augustine uses a very similar image: "If any of these [the elect] should perish, God is mistaken; but none of them perishes, because God is not mistaken. If any of these should perish, God is overcome by human sin; but none of them perishes, because God is overcome by nothing."[27]

For Augustine this constituted the good news, yet he asked himself, Does not Scripture also talk about those who will be rejected; about a limit

to God's grace? Augustine thought so, and he solved the problem by developing the concept of predestination: All human beings are sinful and deserve damnation; everyone belongs to the *massa damnata* ("the damned mass"); yet God has in eternity decided to elect some (though not on the basis of their merits) and to save them from damnation. Augustine was convinced that this was not unfair since all deserve damnation, and some get only what they deserve. Though he acknowledged that this arbitrariness of God seems to contradict God's love, he did not try to reconcile these contradictions; for him they were part of the mystery of God. However, Augustine did not claim to know who the elect and who the reprobate were; quite the opposite, "for as we know not who belongs to the number of the predestinated, we ought in such wise to be influenced by the affection of love as to will all men to be saved."[28]

This last quote might help to soften the image of Augustine a little bit; though he firmly believed in predestination, he advised his readers not to claim what is only God's: the knowledge of who is elected. No one can claim to know who is "in" and who is "out." But even with this warning, Augustine's teaching of predestination has been misread and misused to divide human beings into the ones God has chosen for salvation ("the chosen race," "God's own people") and those who will be lost for all eternity. As Russell and Plaskow have reminded us, this idea has proved to be harmful and oppressive not only in the history of the church but also in society.

With all this in mind, is there anything feminist and womanist theology can or should learn from Augustine? As I have already noted, I think there is indeed something valuable to be found here, namely, his insistence on God's irresistible grace. Augustine, who has been called "the doctor of grace," can remind us of the good news that we do not have to take the first step to remake ourselves, to be right with God. We do not need to be righteous to be loved by God; we receive God's grace despite our not being righteous. This grace of God is a transformative grace, a grace that creates new identities. This Yes, which will not be reversed, contains liberating power especially for women who are plagued by feelings that they never will measure up, that they are not good enough, that they are not worthy. With this Yes we receive a new role as God's beloved daughters and sons, called and enabled to live in right relationships, not only with God but also with ourselves and others.

John Calvin

Turning now to Calvin (1509–1564) and his understanding of predestination, we find that he follows Augustine's teaching very closely, so that he could actually be called a "reimpristinator of Augustinian theology."[29] At

some points, Calvin even seems to rely more heavily on Augustine than on Scripture—something he usually does not do. Like Augustine, Calvin points out first of all God's sovereign grace and the inability of humans to save themselves. He, again like Augustine, does not begin with God's eternal decree but rather develops his understanding of predestination as a consequence of his "emphasis on God's free and sovereign grace in salvation: the problems of human inability and man's reliance for salvation upon the sovereign grace of God as mediated by Christ are the two grounds of Calvin's predestinarian conceptuality."[30] And contrary to yet another common misunderstanding, predestination is not the central dogma on which Calvin's theology is built.[31] It is true, however, that for Calvin it certainly was the "crown of soteriology,"[32] a keystone for his doctrinal arch.

Calvin's placement of this doctrine within his doctrinal framework varies quite a bit across his writings. But, differing from Augustine and the Scholastic tradition, Calvin always treats predestination in the sphere of Christology or soteriology. This placement is not unimportant, for it indicates that Calvin does not view predestination as something to be discussed in a speculative fashion (as part of the doctrine of God or special category of providence, for example) but as something established in the salvific Christ event. For example, in book 3 of the last edition of his *Institutes*, Calvin discusses predestination under the title "The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits Come to Us from It, and What Effects Follow." It is only in Christ that the believer can find comfort in this doctrine:

> But I do not merely send men off to the secret election of God to await with gaping mouth salvation there. I bid them make their way directly to Christ in whom salvation is offered us, which otherwise would have lain hid in God. For whoever does not walk in the plain path of faith can make nothing of the election of God but a labyrinth of destruction. . . . Christ therefore is for us the bright mirror of the eternal and hidden election of God, and also the earnest and pledge.[33]

Again, this placement is more than just a doctrinal game; like Augustine, Calvin is motivated by a deep pastoral concern: how can we know whether we are elected? He saw that by looking at oneself, one ends only in despair. It is not in who we are and what we do that we find any confirmation of our chosenness. It is not even our faith that secures our salvation since for Calvin "election . . . is the mother of faith."[34] It is only in Christ that the believer can find comfort.

> Rare indeed is the mind that is not repeatedly struck with this thought: whence comes your salvation but from God's election? Now, what

> revelation do you have of your election? This thought, if it has impressed itself upon him, either continually strikes him in his misery with harsh torments or utterly overwhelms him. . . . But if we have been chosen in [Christ], we shall not find assurance of our election in ourselves; and not even in God the Father, if we conceive him as severed from his Son.[35]

Interestingly, Calvin bases his discussion of predestination here not only on Scripture (and Augustine) but also on experience: "We teach nothing not borne out by experience,"[36] the experience of those tormented by the question of whether they are chosen or not. Calvin wants to give comfort to these distraught believers: It is not yourself but God's grace in Christ in which you can trust with your whole heart. Alongside his theological experience, Calvin's experiences in his historical context provide us with another key for understanding his teaching of predestination: Protestant Christians of his time were facing dreadful difficulties, persecution, and even death all over Europe, and thus Calvin stressed predestination "as an assurance of God's grace sufficient to sustain faith even to martyrdom."[37]

As much as Calvin tried to avoid any kind of speculation about election, he did not elude it completely.[38] Calvin took Scripture very seriously, and he came to the conclusion that Scripture does not talk only about election but also about reprobation (some people are left in their sinful state and will not receive salvation but eternal punishment). Though he called this a "horrible decree," he was still convinced that this is what Scripture teaches, for example, in Romans 9. This led Calvin to the conclusion that he had to talk about God not only choosing some for salvation but also passing over others. In his teaching of double predestination, election and reprobation are set side by side as opposing equivalents, as one can see in his well-known definition of predestination: "We call predestination God's eternal decree by which he compacted with himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others."[39] Following this line of thought, the salvation event in Christ, which was so highly emphasized in Calvin's teaching, could be seen as having only "instrumental but not fundamental significance";[40] in other words, Christ only carries out God's eternal decree.

Helpful as Calvin might be with his insistence on God's sovereign grace in Jesus Christ, motivated by the pastoral concern of comfort to troubled believers, ultimately his teaching of double predestination may lead us on a dangerous path, as did Augustine's. Again, against Calvin's intention, we may be tempted to divide humanity into the chosen and the reprobate, into those who are "in" (which usually means "us") and those who are "out" ("the others"), with all the dire consequences that follow.

Karl Barth

The approach of Karl Barth (1886–1968) to election represents a fundamental change in theological discourse.[41] Like Augustine and Calvin, Barth also emphasizes God's grace in Christ as the source of salvation and basis of election, but his arguments differ considerably from Calvin (whom he criticizes extensively) and might prove helpful for a feminist reformulation of the doctrine.

In freedom and love as defined in and through Christ, God has chosen to be the God of human beings—this is for Barth the foundation of all of theology. Against the mystery of the traditional teaching of predestination, in which God's decision includes a Yes and a No, Barth claims that the doctrine of election contains only good news; it is "the sum of the gospel . . . the gospel *in nuce*"[42] since it speaks of God's freedom in which God is "the One who eternally loves."[43] God, as the relational triune God,[44] has decided from the beginning to be in relationship with human beings as their God and has created human beings to be in relationship with God, so that they may be God's people:

> The fact that God makes this movement, the institution of the covenant, the primal decision "in Jesus Christ," which is the basis and goal of all His works—that is grace. Speaking generally, it is the demonstration, the overflowing of the love which is the being of God, that He who is entirely self-sufficient, who even within Himself cannot know isolation, willed even in all His divine glory to share his life with another. . . . It occurs even where there is no question of claim or merit on the part of the other. It is love which is overflowing, free, unconstrained, unconditioned. . . . It is love which is patient, not consuming this other, but giving it place, willing its existence for its own sake and for the sake of the goal appointed to it.[45]

This covenant of God with God's people Israel has been fulfilled in time, a covenant with sinners who do not deserve to be partners.[46] Barth redefines the object (and subject) of election and argues that it is *not* the individual believer first of all who is elected but the human being Jesus Christ who is *the* elect: "In its simplest and most comprehensive form the dogma of predestination consists . . . in the assertion that the divine predestination is the election of Jesus Christ."[47] But, following the logic of Chalcedon (Christ being truly divine and truly human), Barth adds that Christ is at the same time not only the elect but also, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the one who elects. It is in Christ's double role that Barth finds assurance for believers. Barth was convinced that "only a consistent Christocentricity can secure and guarantee a thoroughly nonspeculative character for our theocentric theology."[48] There can be no more questioning whether

I am elected, since Christ is the elect, and I am elected in him: "We have to see our own election in that of the man Jesus because His election includes ours within itself and because ours is grounded in His. We are elected together with Him in so far as we are elected 'in Him.'"[49] In this sense, "double" predestination has a new meaning. It does not describe God's twofold decision to save some and to pass over others, but it encompasses rather "first, a predestination of God to be gracious and, second, a predestination of humanity to be chosen and redeemed. Election means grace."[50]

Barth stops short of explicitly teaching universalism (that all will be saved) since he does not want to assume God's final judgment, but it is hard to see how this does not follow from his arguments. Since Christ is *the* elected as well as *the* rejected, because he has taken upon himself the rejection of humankind, there can be no more fundamental difference between the two groups of "elected" and "rejected"; they stand alongside each other, mutually attached to one another,[51] united in the one hope in Christ: "It would be to ignore Jesus Christ if we were to attempt to deny to others the hope upon which the elect themselves are also exclusively dependent—and even more, if we were not prepared to regard them wholly in the light of this hope."[52]

As a feminist theologian, this line of thought offers me a helpful perspective: like other liberation theologies, feminist theologies claim God's preferential option for those who are marginalized and oppressed, rejected by society and church, rejected by those who have the power to define who belongs to "the chosen" and "the rejected." Barth's argument provides a profound critique of the very ground of any definition of chosen and rejected. Seen from a christological perspective, there can be no valid argument for any kind of arrogant exclusiveness. On the contrary, all human beings stand in solidarity with each other because Christ stands in solidarity with them.

Barth also offers yet another useful insight in his discussion of what it actually means to be elected, to be called by God. As I noted in the beginning of this chapter, predestination has often been misunderstood as a kind of "afterlife insurance" for the elect. Barth vehemently criticizes this attitude. For him the divine gift includes a task; being elected means being elected for service to God and others. Being a Christian means first of all being a witness to God in word and deed, sharing in partnership Christ's prophetic work.[53] The freedom Christians can live is indeed a "freedom from," but primarily it is a joyful "freedom for,"[54] freedom for serving God and for serving fellow human beings:

> The liberation of the Christian takes place . . . as he is drawn out of solitariness into fellowship. The glories and miseries of isolation, of self-dependence, of loneliness, are now over for the Christian. As a witness

> of Jesus Christ he has nothing more to seek or find in this dark cavern. With every step which he takes as such he moves . . . over and into fellowship with Jesus Christ, which at once opens up in two dimensions as fellowship with God, . . . and as fellowship with men.[55]

Barth explicates numerous biblical stories of calling and concludes that the assurance of personal salvation and the mission and sending of the called ones as one community always go together.[56] In that sense, God's election is only complete when it becomes actual on our side, when we make our own election to be for God in the world.[57] Personal salvation, for Barth, is not the central focus of Christian life and piety, but participating actively in God's mission is.

Of the three authors we have considered, Barth seems to provide the most helpful insights for a feminist exploration of election. His emphases on God's grace in Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ as *the* elected and rejected, and on election for service seem to correspond with some concerns of feminist and womanist theologies as previously discussed. On the basis of the discussion of these three authors, what issues might we want to explore further?

ELECTION FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

As I have indicated throughout this chapter, I am convinced that the doctrine of election can indeed be liberating. Following the four issues and concerns I have identified in the section "The Trouble with Predestination," I will explore some insights we have gained on our way through classical theology and employ their contribution for feminist and womanist theologies.

First, as we have learned from Karl Barth, the graceful election by God in Christ is not first and foremost a "private" election. Christ is the only elected person, and in him, we are elected as the community of Christ's disciples, not as a group of individually elected persons. This line of thought is, of course, not new. Part of the Reformed tradition has consistently dealt with the issue of election not in the context of the individual's salvation but in the context of the Christian community. The Heidelberg Catechism, for example, does not speak about predestination at all but only discusses the church as the chosen people of God (question 54). And already here we find that being chosen implies assurance as well as a task:

> Q. 55: What do you understand by "the communion of saints"? First, that believers one and all, as partakers of the Lord Christ, and all his treasures and gifts, shall share in one fellowship. Second, that each one ought to know that he is obliged to use his gifts freely and with joy for the benefit and welfare of others.

Being chosen for a task means that *all* members of the community have received gifts of grace (though differing ones) and that they are "obliged" to use them "freely and with joy"—a call to self-critique for a church where not only women but also other marginalized groups are excluded from using their gifts to the "benefit and welfare of others." Excluding those who are different from us (with respect to gender, race, age, class, sexual orientation) from this task keeps them from being faithful disciples of Christ.

There is another issue at stake here: God's graceful election does not focus on the individual only, and, even more, being chosen does not set a limit to what we see as our community. God's election is not a "private" election, but it is also no "Christian" election. As Barth has reminded us, "in view of [Christ's] election, there is no other rejected but Himself. It is just for the sake of the election of *all* the rejected that He stands in solitude over against them all."[58] Election in Christ, therefore, means the election of the community of all human beings, and the church is called to be, in words and deeds, a witness to this gracious election. (I will discuss this aspect subsequently under the fourth point.) It would be well to follow this line of thought and develop this argument even further than Barth did: how would we understand election, if we do not limit God's gracious act to human beings but extend it to all of God's creation?

Second, the doctrine of election does not primarily promise us an "afterlife insurance"; it has immediate consequences right here and now. If we as Christ's disciples are elected for a task, then election cannot deal with eternal life only. Understood this way, election does not lead to "quietistic resignation in the face of a destiny one cannot influence,"[59] but rather to the opposite: active engagement in and for the world. As partners in God's mission, though, we are not taking over God's mission from God, but participating in it as those who are set free for service. Being elected by God does not make us into the "privileged ones" over against those who are "rejected"; instead, God's gracious election sends us out not only to serve God but to serve our fellow human beings and God's good creation as well.

In this context, it is important to note that feminist and womanist theologians have spent some time redefining the terms "service" and "servant" in light of Christ, the Lord and Servant.[60] A redefined understanding of service "implies autonomy and power used in behalf of others."[61] Yet even after being redefined, it remains a term only to be used with great caution, especially in the United States, with its history of slavery, segregation, and racial discrimination, as Jacquelyn Grant has reminded us.[62] With her warning in mind, I suggest adopting Grant's term in describing the task of election: becoming disciples of Christ.

To return, then, to election: its purpose is to follow Christ on his messianic journey. This discipleship includes friendship, friendship with Christ as well as friendship with those who have no friends. As friends of

God, we act not like children nor like servants but as adults, called out by God. In this sense, we indeed become agents, which leads us to the third aspect, the understanding of human agency.

Within the traditional Reformed understanding of *human agency*, we may be passive before God with respect to our salvation, but, following Kathryn Tanner, the noncompetitive relation between God and human beings means that human agency does not have to decrease so that God may increase: "The creature's receiving from God does not then require its passivity in the world: God's activity as the giver of ourselves need not come at the expense of our own activity. Instead, the creature receives from God its very activity as a good."[63] This agency, though, is distinguished from God's agency in a decisive way; our acts do not have saving powers since the "saving power of Christ is already complete and does not need repeating or reenactment by any of us."[64] This is not a call to mere humbleness (a call women have heard only too often!) but a liberating, life-giving message: Even as agents and partners in God's mission, it is not up to us to "save" the world or ourselves. As still sinful yet freed and free agents we engage in an active discipleship and friendship with the triune God by reflecting God's gracious goodness.[65]

This gracious goodness is not only a declaration by God that we are no longer held accountable for our sins; rather it is, as Calvin has called it, a double grace, for it transforms us into new people and gives us a new identity. As Augustine said, God's grace makes us not only know what we should do but also do what we know. It is Christ's righteousness that makes us into new people. Yet this alien righteousness does not remain "alien," for it transforms us: "Conversion to faith is when one is forgiven because of God's imputation of an alien righteousness, a performative conversion in which we receive a new role, one that calls us to live as those who are loved by God."[66]

This new role, the role of God's beloved, includes covenant partnership. We indeed become agents, agents for the sake of God's mission in and for the world. We are elected for a task.[67] To ward off any hints of works righteousness, it is essential to stress again that our fulfillment of (or our failure to fulfill) this task does not decide whether we receive God's grace; yet this grace is aimed at enabling us to strive for fulfillment. That is why a feminist interpretation of election—even with a new emphasis on human agency—should continue to put God's loving grace in Christ into the center of the discussion. Teaching election in today's competitive world needs to stress the fact that we do not have to help ourselves first in order that God might help us. The divine Yes is indeed God's first and last word, though it includes God's No to our sins. But even God's No can be liberating, because we know that we are not the final judges of ourselves, and that the final judge is the Judged One, Jesus Christ. As Angela West has

written, knowing God as the final judge can have "the power to liberate us from the paralysis of guilt and to regenerate hope."[68] In emphasizing God's grace first, God does not become an arbitrary God, resembling a blind and cruel fate. Emphasizing God's grace in Christ, the elected and elector, opens us up from self-doubts and worries about our "being saved" since we are as God's beloved creatures elected with and in Christ. It also frees us to focus on the question of what "salvation/liberation/redemption" actually means for "women in their different contexts"[69]—in short, how women experience the grace of God in their lives.

Fourth, how do we live this grace of God, and what does this friendship with God mean for our relation to others? It does not lead to a hierarchical separation (Plaskow) from any other human being or group of human beings. It does not lead us to prideful disdain (Tanner) of others. Instead, it leads us into the most profound solidarity, especially with those who are rejected, who are marginalized in church and world. Those who see themselves elected with Christ through faith are called to take up his lifestyle of compassion and hospitality to our neighbors in need.[70]

The life of the elected is not a life of domination or privilege but a life of solidarity. Election rightly understood cannot, as Berkouwer has observed, "be more seriously misinterpreted than when it is seized as a basis for self-exaltation and pretentiousness."[71] Again, the grace of God is not a gift to be stored and looked at occasionally, but an enabling and empowering gift. In receiving God's gift of grace, we are called to become God's gift for others. We are reconciled to God, but we are also ambassadors of God's reconciliation; and this reconciliation will have to be spelled out in concrete details in every time and place. Being elected can mean, very concretely, to resist racism and other forms of oppression, to work against any kind of dehumanizing and unjust structure and power, to work for the flourishing of all created life. Through God's gracious election in Christ, boundaries are broken up, definitions of who is "in" and who is "out" are fundamentally challenged; the "chosen race" can only mean the "human race."

But we are not living in paradise yet. Even though we know that in Christ we all are already elected to be God's reconciled community, reality seems to prove the opposite. Everywhere we look we find people exploiting one another and nature and abusing political, economical, or social power in brutal and selfish ways, thus violating the image of God in others and in themselves. How do we, as God's ambassadors of reconciliation, react to those who so flagrantly abuse their powers? Can we remain an "inclusive" community by providing hospitality even to those who work and live against all we believe in? Are there not situations where we have to follow those passages in Scripture that also speak about God's inhospitality; are there not times, "when we must resist offering hospitality to certain persons because of their destructive powers, when we are called instead to pray that

God will show them hospitality, while delivering us from them"?[72] There definitely are times and situations where we are called to be "exclusive," but it is difficult for a Christian community to discern when and where excluding people is grounded in our faithfulness to God's reconciliation and *not* in our own agendas, dislikes, and prejudices. Exclusion needs to be the last step in a long process of inviting into community those who act in destructive ways. Because of Christ's election and the chosenness of all humans in Christ, any form of exclusion can only be provisional, aimed at ultimate reconciliation and reunion—though we may not live to see it. The Belhar Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) in South Africa (1982) provides an informative and enlightening example of the provisionality of exclusion. Fighting against the theological foundation and practical consequences of apartheid in church and society, they confessed that those who adhere to a theology of apartheid are heretics and have already left the Christian community. Excluding apartheid supporters from all forms of community, then, merely names the fact that apartheid supporters have already turned away from the Christian gospel and Christian community. This exclusion was a most serious act and not taken lightly by the DRMC; and it was always was seen as a provisional act only, as the accompanying letter to the confession states: "Our prayer is that this act of confession will not place false stumbling blocks in the way thereby to cause and foster false divisions, but rather that it will be *reconciling and uniting*. We know that such an act of confession and process of reconciliation will necessarily involve much pain and sadness. It demands the pain of repentance, remorse, and confession; the pain of individual and collective renewal and a changed way of life. . . . We pray that our brothers and sisters throughout the Dutch Reformed church family, but also outside it, will want to make this new beginning with us, so that we can be free together and together may walk the road of reconciliation and justice. . . . We believe that this is possible in the power of our Lord and by his Spirit."[73]

The Confession of Belhar reminds us that the "exclusiveness" of Christ as the elected and elector can only be understood in a fundamentally inclusive sense: In Christ, God has elected humanity in all its diversity.[74] This does not mean that the Christian religion or church now possesses the divine truth—God's truth always remains God's truth since God is not bound to the church. We may even learn something about what it means to be elected from those outside of the Christian church who reflect the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. This has a double consequence for interreligious dialogue: we can no longer see others as "others," as those whose souls we have to save from damnation; we can only see them as fellow elected and witness to them our understanding of what election means. At the same time, we remain radically open to what God may be teaching us through them:

> We remember that God has not left himself without witness in any nation at any time. When we approach the man of faith other than our own, it will be in a spirit of expectancy to find how God has been speaking to him and what new understanding of the grace and love of God we may ourselves discover in this encounter. Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on men's dreams. More seriously still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival.[75]

In the section "The Trouble with Predestination," I quoted Tanner's list of possible negative reactions that might emerge from a belief in predestination/election. With these steps towards a reformulated doctrine of election, we may be able to come closer to the more liberating and life-giving aspects of this teaching, which Tanner describes:

> Comfort in the assurance that one's failings may be remedied by God; . . . thankfulness and love for God's free mercy; . . . trust that God's offer in Christ is reliable; . . . concern for good works as the appropriate consequence of one's election; . . . forgiving tolerance of the failings displayed by oneself and others, in recognition of the fact that moral achievements are not what distinguishes persons in the eyes of God; . . . courage to persevere as Christian workers in the struggle to overcome sin and evil.[76]

My hope is that seeing the doctrine of election from this perspective may indeed bring us closer to the good news in Christ.