

Does Ephesians 1 teach individual predestination to eternal salvation?

In various contemporary (but chiefly in more conservative/fundamentalist) circles, there are two camps that are typically represented when interpreting Ephesians 1: Calvinists and Classical Arminians. The Calvinists follow in the line of the reformed John Calvin answering the lead question affirmatively and adding that such predestination is "unconditional." The Classical Arminians follow in the line of Jacob Arminius likewise answering that question affirmatively but adding that such predestination is "conditional." Both Calvin and Arminius held certain beliefs about the author of Ephesians and the type of meaning that the reader could derive from the text. They both believed that the Apostle Paul had written the letter, and both also "endorsed the widespread patristic understanding of the Bible as the word of God."¹

Ephesians 1 is often used as a proof-text by Calvinists and Classical Arminians to support the doctrine of predestination of individuals being elected to eternal salvation. For example, Calvinist Bruce Ware, in defending the predestination of individual election writes, "What is often to us a 'controversial' and 'potentially divisive' doctrine to be ignored, at best, and repulsed, at worst, was for Paul, most notably, one of the sources of his greatest joy and strength. *Consider Ephesians 1.*"² But is this an accurate assessment? Does Ephesians 1 actually support either the Calvinist or Classical Arminian interpretation? In this essay I will argue that Ephesians 1 does not sufficiently support the idea that each individual who will be saved is elected by God according to his

¹ Anthony Thiselton, "Biblical studies and theoretical hermeneutics," in *Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 97.

² Bruce Ware, "Divine Election to Salvation: Unconditional, Individual, and Infralapsarian," in *Perspective on Election: 5 Views*, ed. Chad Own Brand, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 1, emphasis mine.

predestination. This is not to say that the entire doctrine is false, just that Ephesians 1, rightly interpreted, does not support the doctrine. To demonstrate this, first, I will explain my methodology so as to explain my methodology and the goals of the essay. Then, I will set forth the view that Ephesians 1 is about the Jewish/Gentile distinction between Jewish chosenness and the inclusion of Gentiles into salvation by virtue of their own exercise of faith (“having believed”³). Four main points will be adduced to support this view. Lastly, various problems, both textual and logical, will be posed to those who interpret Ephesians 1 in either the Calvinist or Classical Arminian manner.

Questions concerning the postmodern discussion of whether or not we are culturally bound to our own interpretations are put aside. I will instead attempt to operate upon the same hermeneutical principles as Calvin and Arminius did (or, at least, as the contemporary Calvinists and Classical Arminians do now). Before delving into Calvin’s and Arminius’s interpretations of Ephesians 1, two preliminary remarks are in order.

Authorship

Regarding the authorship of Ephesians, some scholars affirm the traditional Pauline view, whereas others posit either authorship by a disciple of Paul (post-Pauline) or its merely having been written in Paul’s name (pseudepigraphical). Regardless of the different positions, James Dunn writes, “Ephesians and the Pastoral epistles can be regarded as properly ‘Pauline,’ at least in the sense that they show the continuing influence of Paul’s personality and thought in the years and changing situations following his death.”⁴ Francis Foulkes does hold that Paul wrote the letter, and he draws many

³ Ephesians 1:13, all references come from the New King James Version.

⁴ James Dunn, “The Pauline Letters,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 277.

comparisons between Ephesians and Colossians to support his position. He argues, “There are more numerous and more sustained similarities between Ephesians and Colossians than between any other two New Testament Epistles. It is said that, with varying degrees of similarity, 75 out of the 155 verses of Ephesians are found in Colossians.”⁵ One example that is relevant to our purpose is Paul’s use of ‘mystery’ and his commission as apostle to the Gentiles (Ephesians 3:1-13 and Colossians 1:23-29). Foulkes thinks, “The parallels cannot be coincidental, but they are not such as one would find where a writer was dependent on another written record before him. They can only be explained by the assumption that the mind of the writer of Ephesians was full of the thought and expression of Colossians.”⁶ For our purposes, it is not necessary to determine whether or not Paul wrote the letter. From this point forward, I will refer to the author of Ephesians as ‘Paul.’

Addressees/Audience

The letter is addressed “to the saints who are in Ephesus,” (v. 1) though some scholars believe that ‘in Ephesus’ was a later insertion. ‘Ephesians’ was almost universally accepted as the title of the epistle from the second century onward. However, “there is evidence that the title is not truly original, and is, at least to some extent, a misnomer.”⁷ The oldest manuscript of Ephesians discovered is from a Chester Beatty papyrus dating to around A.D. 200 and lacking the words “in Ephesus.” Furthermore, two of Christianity’s greatest textual treasures—the fourth-century codices Sinaiticus and

⁵ Francis Foulkes, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Ephesians*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 20.

⁶ Foulkes, 21.

⁷ Foulkes, 17.

Vaticanus—also lack any named city.⁸ Marcion (eventually deemed a heretic) believed it was written to the church of Laodicea, which Francis Foulkes believes was a deduction from Colossians 4:16.⁹ The Muratorian Fragment, the oldest known (*circa* 170) list of New Testament books, includes both Ephesians and Laodiceans, thus making the issue more complicated. Furthermore, according to Foulkes, even Origen states that the words ‘in Ephesus’ were absent from the text. Tertullian accused Marcionites of text-tampering but provide no details. Into the fourth century, Basil and Jerome “make it plain that the best manuscripts they had did not include the words.”¹⁰ Thus, there is no clear evidence that this letter was directed or even delivered to the church in Ephesus.

Main Argument from Textual Analysis

Ephesians 1:3-12 is seen as a type of liturgical hymn; it is one long sentence. In this section, Paul writes that God “chose us in him before the foundation of the world” (v. 4) and that God “predestined us to adoption” (v. 5). Also, in v. 11, “we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined.” There are, however, two important subsections that are also relevant to the ‘predestination’ discussion. In v9-10, Paul writes that God “made known to us the mystery of His will...that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ.” And perhaps most important of the two subsections is v12-13. Here we are told that the ‘we’ group of v. 3-12 is “who *first* trusted in Christ” and that there is additionally a ‘you’ group addressed in v. 13: “In Him

⁸ Foulkes, 17.

⁹ Foulkes, 17.

¹⁰ Foulkes, 17.

you *also* trusted, *after* you heard the word of truth.”¹¹ A more detailed consideration of the passages will be undertaken later.

Paul’s language of election, choosing, and predestination in Ephesians 1, seen through Calvinist and/or Classical Arminian lenses, appears to be referring to the individual election of each Christian, yet as I am proposing in opposition thereto that it refers to the corporate election of the Jews (and particularly those who embraced Christianity). But what is the difference between individual and corporate election unto salvation? Put simply, individual election is God’s choosing of each and every individual who will be saved for eternal life. Corporate election is God’s choosing of a group from which he would work out his salvific plan. It is important to observe that corporate election does not rule out the possibility that God chose one or more members of the group either for salvation or for some other purpose of His. Here are two examples: Calvinists believe that Abraham was one of the chosen elect, and that God predetermined this to be the case. Calvinists understand this to be an example of individual election.¹² On the other hand, when God chose to work out his salvific plans through the nation of Israel, he was electing the group corporately. Notice here how God can choose a group but that might not mean that God chooses some or all of the individuals within that group. Putting this in Old Testament terms, we might say that although God chose Israel as his nation, not all of the people of the first covenant were chosen for eternal salvation. Jack Cottrell recognizes this distinction:

This election of Israel was the election of the nation in general, not the election of specific individuals. The nation was chosen specifically to prepare the way for

¹¹ Emphases mine.

¹² But it is, of course, also consistent with a particular individual election other than salvation (such as an earthly task) within the corporate election understanding.

the coming Messiah. The nation could serve its purpose of preparing for the Messiah even if the majority of individual Jews were lost.¹³

Logically speaking, to think that what is true of a whole is true of every part of the whole is to commit the fallacy of division. This is perhaps the most readily apparent criticism of the Calvinist and Classical Arminian interpretations of Ephesians 1. More description of this problem will be addressed later.

So why might we think that Paul is merely referring to Christian Jews when he speaks of predestination (v. 4, 5, 11)? There are four points supporting this hypothesis: Paul's use of the Old Testament language, understanding Paul's use of 'mystery,' the description of the 'you' group throughout the letter, and the explicit sequencing within verses 12 and 13 of the 'we' group ("first") following by the inclusion of the 'you' group. Cottrell, a Classical Arminian, categorizes these four points into two groups. He summarizes my position nicely, and hence I will quote him at length:

Regarding Ephesians 1 as a whole, I am not at all convinced that verses 4, 5, and 11, are referring to individual election in the first place. I believe a strong case can be made for an entirely different approach, namely, that Paul is speaking of the predestination of the two different categories of the human race as commonly distinguished in his day, i.e., the *Jews* and the *Gentiles*. I base this case on two facts: (1) the sudden shift from first person plural to second person plural in 1:13; and (2) the underlying theme of the letter as expressed in 2:11-3:21, i.e., God's 'eternal purposes' (3:11) of uniting Jews and Gentiles together through Jesus Christ into a single body, the church.¹⁴

Cottrell's take on Ephesians 1 is exemplary for our purpose (as previously stated) because, as a classical Arminian, he still believes in individual predestination for eternal salvation, but not based on anything found in Ephesians 1. In fact, he cautions that any passage that appears to talk about individual election unto salvation might not be about

¹³ Jack W. Cottrell and others, "Responses to Bruce A. Ware," in *Perspective on Election: 5 Views*, ed. Chad Own Brand, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 76.

¹⁴ Cottrell, 61.

eternal salvation at all. He warns, “it is of supreme importance to note that many of the passages about election have nothing to do with predestination to salvation but refer instead of God’s choosing of certain individuals or groups for service,” that is, to complete some earthly task. The first two points deal with the content of the letter and the last two points deal with the addressees.

First, Paul extensively uses Old Testament language concerning Israel as God’s chosen nation. My purpose for this point is to note how Paul “shows a particular relationship to the Jewish heritage as regards language, terminology, thought and ideas, and most importantly to lay bare the significant bearing of this Jewish context upon his attitude toward the Gentiles.”¹⁵ Dunn focuses on the use of characteristically Jewish language of the blessing (*berakhah*) of Ephesians 1:3-14.¹⁶ Phrases such as ‘Blessed are you,’¹⁷ ‘chosen,’¹⁸ ‘the beloved,’ ‘the mystery of his will,’ ‘God’s possession,’ and others are all found in the Old Testament. He deduces,

None of this can be put down simply to a contrived or even learned familiarity with the Jewish scriptures. Rather we have to speak of a writer whose own thought processes are thoroughly impregnated with characteristic Jewish thought and manners of speech.¹⁹

Tet-Lim N. Yee uses Dunn to chart other Jewish references found elsewhere in Ephesians.²⁰ Yee observes, “What is mirrored in these statements is, indeed, the deep

¹⁵ Tet-Lim N. Yee, *Jews, Gentiles and Ethnic Reconciliation: Paul’s Jewish Identity and Ephesians*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 35.

¹⁶ James Dunn, “Deutero-Pauline letters,” in *Early Christian Thought in its Jewish Context*, ed. John Carclay and John Sweet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 136-137.

¹⁷ 1 Kings 8:15, Luke 1:68-75

¹⁸ Deuteronomy 32:15, 33:5, 26, Isaiah 44:2, Daniel 3:35

¹⁹ Dunn (1996), 137.

²⁰ Yee, 42, using Dunn (1996), 137. There are both explicit reference and allusions to the Old Testament (with Apocrapha included). The passages from Ephesians

sense of chosenness which enabled him to translate the Gentiles into the Jewish world through his rhetoric of ‘otherness.’”²¹ This chosenness is exclusively Jewish. Though the idea of God as a father is found in Greek conceptions, the Jewish view is woven with the history of God and his relationship to the people of Israel.²² Furthermore, the *berakhah* is an explicit reminder of Israel’s understanding that they are God’s people of covenant and promise.²³

Second, it is important to understand the use of ‘mystery’ (1:9, 3:3). Paul writes that God “made known to us the mystery of His will ... that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ” (1:9-10) and “He made known to me the mystery ... that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs (3:3, 6). Paul’s use of ‘mystery’ is seen elsewhere,²⁴ but these two passages are sufficient to make our point. Paul’s meaning is that the Gentiles should be included into the promises and gifts of salvation, whereas until that point, they were seen as outsiders. John A. Allan writes, “in this epistle mystery means the inclusion of both Gentiles and Jews in the Church, which points to the unification of all humanity in Christ, and so ultimately to the

are bolded. Explicit: **1:20**/Ps. 110:1, **1:22**/Ps. 8:7, **2:17**/Isa. 57:19, **4:8**/Ps. 68:19, **5:31**/Gen 2:24, **6:2-3**/Exo. 20:12 & Deut. 5:16, **5:14**/Isa. 26:19 or 51:17. Allusions: **4:14**/Isa. 57:20, Sir. 5:9, **4:24**/Gen. 1:26-7, Wis. 9:3, **4:25**/Zech 8:16, **4:26**/Ps. 4:5, Prov. 4:5, Deut. 24:15, **4:30**/Isa. 63:10, **5:2**/ Exo. 29:18, Ps. 40:6, Ezek. 16:9, **5:5**/Wis. 14:12, **5:16**/Dan. 2:8, Amos 5:13, **5:18**/Prov. 23:31, **5:26**/Isa. 61:19, Ezek. 16:9, **5:31-32**/Gen. 2:24, 1 Cor. 6:16, Matt 19:15, Mark 10:7-8, **6:2-3**/Exo. 20:12, Deut. 5:16, Matt. 15:4, Mark 7:10, Luke 18:20, **6:4**/Prov. 2:2 and 3:7, **6:7/2** Chron. 19:6, **6:9**/Lev. 25:43, **6:10**/Isa. 40:26, **6:13**/Wis. 5:17, **6:14**/Isa. 11:5 and 59:17, Wis. 5:18, **6:15**/Isa. 52:7, Nah. 2:1, **6:16**/Wis. 5:19, 21, **6:17**/Isa. 49:2, 59:17, Hosea 6:5

²¹ Yee, 56.

²² Yee, 38, citing Deuteronomy 7:6, 14:2, 32:6, Isaiah 63:16, 64:8, Jeremiah 31:9, Malachi 1:6, 2:10.

²³ Yee, 38-39

²⁴ Yee writes on page 41, “The use of the ‘mystery’ language in Ephesians is extensive”: 1:9, 3:3,4,9, 5:32, 6:19.

unification of the whole universe.”²⁵ Dunn sees Paul’s use of ‘mystery’ as reflective of Romans 9-11 and Colossians 1:27, “that ‘Gentiles are fellow heirs [that is, with Jews].’”²⁶ Yee agrees: “[1:9] is focused largely on God’s plan to unite all things in Christ, and this includes the incorporation of the Gentiles into the body of Christ.”²⁷

This theme of the Jews and Gentiles united is also seen in Ephesians 2, though the term ‘mystery’ is not applied. Here Paul writes that Gentiles were “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise” (2:12) and yet are “no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens” (2:19). Dunn recognizes this as “one of the clearest statements of Paul’s vision of Jew and Gentile integrated within eschatological Israel, the old alienations and barriers broken down through Christ.”²⁸ Thus, Paul writes from the Jewish perspective in reconciliatory terms that God is uniting all things to himself. Perhaps the most important point to take from these first two points is, “It is the language of a Gentile Christianity which cannot understand itself except in terms of the category of Israel and of Israel’s blessings.”²⁹ Without this understanding, interpreters are bound for error in understanding Paul’s point.

Third, it is important to understand the identity of the ‘you’ group which first appears in 1:13. This is because Paul draws a distinction between himself (as necessarily being a member of the first person plural ‘we’ (nominative case), ‘us’ (objective case) and ‘our’ (possessive case) group and the second person plural ‘you’ group. That is, from 1:3-12, Paul included himself (‘we,’ ‘us,’ and ‘our’), yet the second person ‘you’—

²⁵ John A. Allan, *The Epistle to the Ephesians: The Body of Christ*, (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1959), 51.

²⁶ Dunn (1996), 139.

²⁷ Yee, 41.

²⁸ Dunn (1998), 288.

²⁹ Dunn (1996), 139.

when taken with other statements within the text—shows the author’s own exclusion from that group. Elaborating on the Jewish/Gentile distinction, Yee writes, “the author speaks of the Gentiles from a Jewish viewpoint in which ‘you’ is understood as the ethnic ‘other.’”³⁰ This is confirmed by the explanation in our previous point from Ephesians 2:12 and 2:19. But we also see this elsewhere in the letter. Paul writes explicitly of the ‘you’ referent as being Gentiles in 2:11, “you, once Gentiles in the flesh,” 3:1, “for you Gentiles,” and 4:17, “you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk.” There are also implicit mentions of the ‘you’ group as being “once darkness” (5:8), “once were far off” (2:13), and “walked according to the course of this world” (2:2). Yee argues that this is precisely how Jews viewed Gentiles in the first century.³¹ The Jews were the chosen group, the Gentiles were not chosen by God. But now, there is ethnic reconciliation under and through Christ. This, Yee argues, is precisely the theme of Ephesians.

Most scholars agree that the ‘you’ group from 1:12 refers to the Gentiles.³² Even Calvin recognizes this pronoun shift (though he comes to a different conclusion): “Hitherto he has spoken generally of all the elect; he now begins to take notice of separate classes. When he [Paul] says *WE have obtained*, he speaks of himself and of the Jews, or, perhaps more correctly, of all who were the first fruits of Christianity; and afterwards he comes to the Ephesians.”³³ With regard to the ‘you’ of verse 13, Calvin writes, “He associates the Ephesians with himself, and with the rest of those who were

³⁰ Yee, 46, footnote 57.

³¹ Yee, 72-87.

³² Foulkes, 55.

³³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle, (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1855), 206.

the first fruits.”³⁴ This appears to be plain error on Calvin's part because he failed to consider that the text provides starkly different mechanisms for the unified inclusion "in Christ" of both groups: God's election (i.e., "choosing") of the first person group (v. 11 and earlier verses) compared to inclusion of the second person group through "hearing" and "believing" (v. 13) with absolutely no mention of election or choosing of the members of that group. It is not until further on where Calvin recognizes Paul's addressing of the Gentiles in the second and third chapters.³⁵ Calvin additionally posits that the 'you' from 2:1-2, 11-13 also refers to the Ephesians. But does the 'you' reference best describe Ephesians? Not quite. There is an even better identity for the 'you' referent: Ephesian *Gentiles*. It would be a mistake to think that Ephesians who were of Jewish heritage were “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise” (2:12). Tertullian, who antedated Calvin by a millennium, is in agreement with our view that the 'you' group throughout the letter refers to the Gentiles and the 'we' group refers to the Jews:

Now, who could have first trusted — i.e., previously trusted — in God, before His advent, besides Jews to whom Christ was previously announced from the beginning? He who was thus foretold, was also foretrusted. Hence, the Apostle refers the statement to himself, that is, to the Jews, in order that he may draw a distinction with respect to the Gentiles, (when he goes on to say:) [sic] 'In whom you also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel (of your salvation); in whom ye believed, and were sealed with His Holy Spirit of promise.'³⁶

Calvin was close to seeing the truth, insofar as he notes that Paul “speaks of himself and of the Jews” but was mistaken (as explained below) in thinking that it was not because

³⁴ Calvin 207.

³⁵ Calvin, 192

³⁶ Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, Book V, Chapter XVII, http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf03/anf03-35.htm#P7950_2263971 (accessed April 15, 2012).

they were of Jewish heritage that they were chosen, but because they were individually elected and became Christians because of their election. Rather, as Foulkes explicitly explains, “At this point [1:11] Paul is speaking of the Old Testament beginning of the outworking of God’s purpose for men, as he says that *we*, the Jews, became His people.”³⁷ Foulkes thinks the ‘you’ group is the Gentiles because of the change in plural pronouns, which is evident from the end of verse 12.³⁸

Fourth, Paul appears to be making an explicit claim of the chronology (i.e., sequencing) of the divinely elected ‘we’ group (v. 11) as having “hope[d] in Christ” prior to the ‘you’ group. He states in 1:12, “that we who *first* trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory.”³⁹ In contrast, it is the members of the ‘you’ group who later were included (“you *also* trusted, *after* you heard”⁴⁰). In the previous point I provided Tertullian’s and Foulkes’s view that “first” is referring to the Jews. After all, historically speaking, the Jews were the first people group to learn of the Good News because God had used their culture and society to become incarnate, have his earthly ministry, die, and resurrect. Despite the obviousness of this historical understanding, Foulkes provides more insight into the meaning of v. 12’s “trusted” (or “to hope”):

More correctly, the verb means ‘hoped’ (RV), and it has the prefix *pro-* which may mean either that they hoped in Christ before others (but after the incarnation), or that they had set their hope on Christ before He came. The fact that the Jews had the knowledge of the gospel before the Gentiles is expressed in Romans i. 16, ii.9f. It is more likely, however, that the reference here is to the Jewish hope in ‘the Christ’ (the Greek has the article) before He came (cf. Acts xxviii. 20).⁴¹

³⁷ Foulkes, 54.

³⁸ Foulkes, 54.

³⁹ Emphasis mine.

⁴⁰ Emphasis mine.

⁴¹ Foulkes, 54-55.

Therefore, given the use of “trusted”/“hoped” as referring to before the Incarnation and the historical fact of which people group first trusted in Christ we can conclude that the ‘we’ group is, indeed, Jewish Christians.

Allan disagrees. For understanding v12-13, he writes, “the Jew Paul speaking for the Jewish Christians who first constituted the Church, and addressing the Gentile Christians who came in later.”⁴² For this he is correct. But then he blunders. He thinks since ‘we’ “has so far meant the whole Christian community it is probably best to” think that the ‘you’ group is/are “the readers, whoever they may be, to apply to themselves in particular what has been said of the Church at large.”⁴³ Thus, Allan attempts to explain the ‘you’ group as being a sub-group included within the ‘we’ group. And since he believes that the ‘we’ group is the Christian community (and that they are elected because they are Christians, not Jews), he must rationalize that the ‘you’ group is something other than the Christian community. Hence, new Christians. Allan is largely correct (actually, new *Gentile* Christians) but his reasoning is fallacious. These new Christians are not just average twentieth or twenty-first century-type people joining the Christian community. These new Christians were formerly pagan, idolatrous, unchosen Gentiles (per our third point above). Allan’s mistake is in ignoring both the plainly different sequencing and mechanisms (both discussed above) by which the two groups came to hope in Christ. These two differences means that the context contained in the text itself precludes⁴⁴ the second group from being properly seen (contra Alan) as being a subset of the first person

⁴² Allan, 52-53.

⁴³ Allan, 53.

⁴⁴ As a matter of grammatical logic, a second person group (plural) or individual (singular) could, but need not be, a subset of the first person plural group. The context must furnish the answer.

group. This is the same mistake that Calvinists and Arminians make when interpreting Ephesians 1.

Given the evidence of Paul's use of Old Testament language, his use of 'mystery,' the identification of the 'you' group, and Paul's explicit statement that the 'we' group is the first to trust in Christ, we can conclude that the 'we' group refers to Jewish Christians. In light of the four distinctions made above, the importance of correctly identifying the 'we' group as Jewish Christians and not just as the entire Christian community becomes evident. The description of the Jewish Christians as being predestined and elected refers to their predestination and election as the nation of Israel, as God's chosen people, and thus, rules out the textual support for individual election. As previously mentioned, those who think that corporate election means individual election of each member of the corporate group are committing the logical fallacy of division. Just because Israel was chosen as God's nation did not mean that every person ever belonging to that chosen nation was chosen, individually, for eternal salvation. There is simply insufficient textual evidence to support the idea of individual election in Ephesians 1. But Calvinists and Classical Arminians both disagree with this conclusion.

They both hold that Ephesians 1 speaks to individual, not corporate, election for salvation, although they each understand it differently. Arminius nicely explains what individual election is:

Predestination, therefore, as it regards the thing itself, is the Decree of the good pleasure of God in Christ, by which He resolved within himself from all eternity, to justify, adopt, and endow with everlasting life, to the praise of his own glorious grace, believers on whom He had decreed to bestow faith (Eph. i; Rom. ix.).⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Jacob Arminius, "Disputations on Some of the Principal Subjects of Christian Religion" in *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. James Nichols and William Nichols, vol 2, (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1986), 226.

The difference between the two camps is that the Calvinist believes in unconditional election, that God elects a select number of people he will save for whatever reason he wanted to (some think arbitrarily), whereas the Classical Arminian holds to conditional election, that God elects a select number of people he will save based on the foreknowledge that he has of how those individuals would choose to accept the gift of salvation. When it comes to Ephesians 1, both interpret Paul to be explaining the doctrine of *individual* election. In his commentary on Ephesians, Calvin wrote, “Immediately after the salutation in the commencement of the first chapter, he treats of God’s free election. This affords him an opportunity of stating that they were now called into the kingdom of God, because they had been appointed to life before they were born.”⁴⁶ Calvinist Bruce Ware thinks Ephesians 1:3-14 makes it easy to perceive that God chooses individuals to eternal salvation and that any notion of conditional election “is so clearly out of step with what Paul asserts that it simply jeopardizes and undermines the praise that is to go to God alone for this glorious saving work (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14).”⁴⁷

The reasoning behind the Calvinist and Arminian interpretations of individual predestination language in Ephesians 1 is based on Ephesians 1:1, “to the saints” and “to the faithful.”⁴⁸ Thus, Paul, in his language about predestination and election, is referring to Christians. But as we have shown in the foregoing four points supporting our hypothesis, this approach appears to be too simplistic and textually flawed. Moreover, as will now be shown, the individual election interpretations of Ephesians 1 leads to some unwanted conclusions and raises problematic questions.

⁴⁶ Calvin, 191.

⁴⁷ Ware, 13.

⁴⁸ Calvin, 196.

First, how can the Calvinist or Classical Arminian avoid the fallacy of division problem? Both camps think that Paul is addressing a Christian group at Ephesus, which is both the ‘we’ and ‘you’ group, where those of the ‘you’ group might be newer Christians. But on what grounds should we think that Paul is talking about individual election and not, say, the corporate election of Christians? The corporate election of Christians might be similar to the language referring to Israel as a chosen nation. It might be the case that God has chosen to now work out the rest of his earthly plans through the group of Christians who “infiltrate” all types of societies. Thus, just as in the first covenant, one was considered an Israelite by his or her status as a citizen of the nation, so now one is considered a Christian by his or her status as being part of the Christian community.

Second, the language regarding predestination and election refers to the ‘we’ group but not the ‘you’ group. Recall, the ‘we’ group was “the first to trust in Christ” (v. 12). The ‘you’ group is never described as having been predestined; the mechanism of inclusion of those in the ‘you’ group is expressly explained in starkly different terms: “hearing” and “believing” (v. 13) rather than having been “chosen” (v. 11). If it were replied that there is an implicit claim to the ‘you’ group being predestined, what reasons are there for thinking that? After all, the ‘you’ group is a group that even Paul necessarily excludes himself from.

Third, the belief that Paul is referring to all Christians (including future ones) is problematic when understanding his use of ‘mystery.’ This is because Christians were not expecting any mystery to be revealed to them. If individual election unto eternal salvation were true of Ephesians 1, and if we were to remain consistent with the text (that

the audience is about the Christian community), the Paul is referring to some mystery that the Christian community was waiting to be revealed to them. But such a conclusion seems misplaced and coarse against what the text is actually telling us. As Foulkes pointed out, the Jews, prior to the Incarnation, were waiting for the mystery to be revealed. Those who think Paul is writing to all Christians must be forced to conclude, as we argued separately above, that these Christians are Jewish Christians. And if these are Jewish Christians, why think that Paul is talking about individual election and not the type of election seen regarding Old Testament Israel?

In summary, I presented four reasons why Ephesians 1 ought to be read in light of the Jewish/Gentile theme. Those reasons were Paul's use of Old Testament language relating to its chosenness, Paul's use of 'mystery,' identifying the 'you' group Paul was addressing, and understanding the explicit sequencing in coming to trust of the 'we' and 'you' groups. Then I provided reasons for why the Calvinistic and Classical Arminian interpretations of individual election are not as coherent as the hypothesis laid out. In fact, many Arminians are coming to realize this. Cottrell, for example, serves as a great example in that his read of Ephesians 1 is not the traditional view of the Classical Arminian, though he still holds to predestined, individual election from other biblical support. Additionally, Cottrell recognizes the growing numbers of Arminians and Semi-Pelagians who hold to corporate election. When it comes to individual or corporate election, he writes, "Arminians have some disagreement over this issue."⁴⁹ This essay has provided reasons for why Classical Arminians and Calvinists should prefer a corporate Jewish Christian by election/individual Gentile by non-election (i.e. by

⁴⁹ Cottrell, 78.

individual hearing and believing) reading of Ephesians 1 rather than the individual election of all Christians (Jew and Gentile alike) interpretation because Ephesians 1 does not sufficiently support the idea that any individual is individually predestined and elected to eternal life.

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