

The Natural Man's Struggle with Reformed Theology: Election vs. Rights of All

By [Tom Elkin](#)

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Since we are dealing with a fairly heavy topic tonight, I'm going to pray again. Let's pray.

Father, we ask You to be with us now. Give us clearness of thought, give us a dedication to Your Word, and give us the courage to be Your people. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

Last week I told you we had gotten, to say, the non-offensive things pretty much out of the way and we were coming to what I call the *more* offensive things. Our topic is Reformed Theology and the Natural Man, or Natural Man's Reaction to Reformed Theology, and that being the case, some of what we talked about in the earlier lessons were fairly understood Christian precepts/concepts that most Christians will sort of agree with. But when we get to hard core reformed theology, we have a dividing line.

Now, this is my conception. If you think about the acrostic, TULIP, most of you know exactly what that is: Total depravity, but when you get to the next one — T-U — Unconditional election, my presupposition that I'm giving to y'all, my assumption is that this is the most critical point of conflict with the natural man and the world today. Total depravity — everybody accepts that as long as you're talking about *everybody*, that's okay, I may disagree with you, but the minute you start claiming something unique and special for *you* and not giving it to everyone else, we have a problem in today's world. So, if you have a graph, total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement (whatever that means!), irresistible grace (whatever that means!), perseverance (yeah), but unconditional election! Do you realize how offensive that is in today's world? Well, that's what we are going to be talking about tonight.

We have shifted gears. We're going into the mountainous terrain in terms of the obstacles most people in today's world see when they think about this 1 % over here on the right side — reformed theology. Okay, you know basically what it is, but let me just lay out some of the core precepts of unconditional election. You also know that unconditional election is one of the cardinal dividing points between the Armenians and the Calvinists. You've heard all this kind of stuff most of your life, but let's just lay out some of it. I love this little introduction that

Spencer has in his book about TULIP and I'm just going to read it to you. He quotes a Baptist confession. You know the Baptists tend to believe, used to believe in this too, but let me just read what he says: "The second of the five points of Calvinism is easily remembered under the letter "U" — the acrostic poem of the word TULIP. That "U" stands for unconditional election. This doctrine is set forth in the Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 in terms almost identical to those of *The Westminster Confession*, in *The 39 Articles* of the Church of England, as well as the *Heidelberg* and *Belgic Confessions* and the *Cannons of Dort*. Quote: "Those of mankind who are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose and the secret council and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen in Christ to everlasting glory out of His mere free grace and love without any other thing in the creature as a condition or cause moving Him thereunto." That's unconditional, isn't it? That is traditional reformed theology, but that also is a hard pill for some people to swallow, especially some of our freewill Christian brothers and sisters.

When I first moved to Memphis about 1977, Lane Adams was the senior minister there, and Lane would have lunch about once a month with Dr. Adrian Rodgers. And every now and then, he would invite me to come and sup with them, so we would have lunch together. Well, I quickly understood that we didn't talk about unconditional election. That was a taboo subject and there are other members of our group that would understand that too, because our campus minister at Ole Miss got into some hot water with brother Adrian about this issue. Now, I'm not saying this in any way caricaturing anybody. I'm just saying it is a touchy subject among fairly devout Christians — that's all I'm trying to say. But if we believe in unconditional election, God does not look forward into the future, recognize who will accept and who will not, and therefore recognizing that you will accept, He predestines you, and recognizing that you will not, He pulls away from you. That's not unconditional election — that's conditional election, and that has been a dividing point.

Now, just some biblical references — I happen to believe that this is the most important thing in terms of our culture and the world today that I'm going to say to y'all in this whole series, so bear with me, okay?

Romans 8:28 — you know it; let me read some of them — "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are called according to His purpose, for whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate."

Romans 9:11 — "For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of Him that calleth. It is written: 'Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.'"

2 Timothy 1:9 — "God has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace, which was

given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.” (referring to that covenant)

John 15:16 — “Ye have not chosen Me, (Christ says) but I have chosen you.”

Ephesians 1:4 — “According as He has chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world.”

John 6 — “No man can come to Me except the Father draw him.”

Acts 13:48 — “And when the Gentiles heard this they were glad and glorified the Word of the Lord, and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.”

Now I could go on, but you get the picture. This is why we believe this. And then that passage in John 6: “The Spirit gives life, the flesh counts for nothing, the words I have spoken to you, they are spirit and they are life. Yet there are some of you that do not believe, for Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray Him.” He went on to say, “This is why I told you that no one can come to Me unless the Father has enabled him.” This is unconditional election, and of course, the next verse down there: “From this time, many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him.” - a reaction to the sovereignty of His body and His blood, but also a potential reaction of His talking about the unconditionality of God having to work in the person. So, unconditional election — salvation is of the Lord; works do not play in it. The reformed position says that the Bible over and over attributes to God His election of humans, not based on what they have done or on what they might do...it is unconditional.

Now, we have heard that; we believe it, but we live in a world today that is a little bit different than the world of our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. I have referred to this book before, *In Defense of Elitism*. I'm gonna read a couple of things to you from it tonight. By the way, the author of this book is a liberal democrat. He states so. He says he is a card carrying member of the ACLU. Now, I'm saying this to you to let you know that there are folks out there beginning to understand that some of the things going on in our world aren't right — and I mean our world as this country. He's saying something: “Talent, achievement, practice and learning, are no longer common differences. Everyone is a star. We have foolishly embraced the unexamined notion that everyone is pretty much alike, and worse (and should be), that self-fulfillment is more important than objective achievement — that the common man is always right, that he needs no interpreters or intermediaries to guide his thinking, that a good and just society should be far more concerned with suckering it's losers than with honoring and encouraging its winners.” Ahh — that's a liberal democrat talking! We'll come back to what he has to say in just a little bit.

Our world today — it is unacceptable to claim uniqueness. Later on in that book, he quotes a passage right after Rudy Giuliani has been elected mayor of New York. A young lady wrote him a note saying: “Why doesn't New York give

scholarships to everyone so that we can all go to the college of our choice and live away from home, regardless of grades or anything else?” Now that's the mindset of many in the world today. I'm painting a picture here: the mindset is that it's inappropriate for anyone to be above anyone else. How does that clang with unconditional election, then? See, for us to claim that God, according to His sovereignty and His grace and will, chooses to elect some and does not choose others — that's unfair! We all should get a scholarship to heaven. We all should be able to participate in whatever good is out there. Now, there's a clear distinct movement to equate all people, all values, all cultures, and all gods in our country. Two words dominate our thinking: equality and diversity. We are to honor.

Now, I want to give you some illustrations of the thinking of our world today. I could come up with dozens more, but just to pick a few. And I'm not picking on any group, please, I'm not. It's the mindset, the thinking, that I'm trying to get across. University of Maryland Department of Social Work has an organization that is sponsored called People for Gender Equality. The mission of People for Gender Equality, PGE, is to educate women and men of our community on gender issues affecting the professional social family and personal lives of all women, to advocate for the eradication of biases including gender, sexual orientation, and racial in school policies, curriculum, and all other issues influencing the wellbeing of women, to work toward a more equitable distribution of men and women among faculty, staff and student body.” Everybody needs to be okay, and any distinctiveness of any group is unacceptable. They have sub-groups: Social Work for Asian Awareness, The Christian Social Work Fellowship, The Lesbian/Gay Bisexual Gender Union — I could go on in reading them but you get the picture, right?

Another organization that's flourishing relatively well in the world today is the Equality Project. “Welcome to the home of the Equality Project” — if you happen to look them up on their webpage. They wish to encourage the public to support equal rights for all humans as well as to encourage the general public to educate themselves about different sexualities, genders, religions, races, cultures, physical and mental abilities, etc. The reasons behind the creation of this project are many. People have been forced to endure blind hatred, misconceptions, and prejudice. Many people who are deemed different, sinful or second-best, have long been tormented by our society, including: lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender, transsexual gender, transsexual persons, people of non-Christian religions, non-white people, people who speak other languages, people who come from other lands or cultures, older citizens, persons of different degrees or physical or mental ability, those suffering from mental illness, economic — I could read it on, but you get the picture, right? This Equality Project is so designed that there is to be no distinction, no differentiation amongst any people for any reasons. And notice, they include religion in there too — a little caveat that they throw out in the Equality Project is: “This project, however, wishes to make it known that the problem is not the blame of white, rich, heterosexual, well-

educated, upper economic class men. They have been discriminated against too. Sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, ageism, etc. like all other forms of blind hatred are reactions (listen to this) to an unknown or the religiously devalued, which are taught to our children by both women and men, gay and straight, of all races, ages, cultures, and languages.”

We’re teaching our children. This is another paragraph. “We teach” - and they’re saying what we are currently doing - “We teach our children that only the religion that they grew up in is the right one — the people who practice a different religion, or people who embody some religiously forbidden characteristics or way of life, are sinful and wrong and are to be shunned, treated as second best. We teach our children that the religion that they grew up with is the one and only true religion. Those who do not believe and support that religion will suffer. We teach our children that the religion they grow up with, alone, should dictate the morals and behaviors of all people, regardless of their own personal belief.” Again, we do, don’t we? Isn’t that what we’re doing with the *Catechism* every Sunday night? Aren’t we trying to educate our children that there is one way, one truth, one God, one salvation? We’re guilty — here I be! The problem is they say that is terribly wrong. The statement is made — “This has to stop. We, as a global society, have to learn to allow our children to be who they are, to accept them as they are, and to learn what we can from them. We teach our children how they will view the world and we have the power of teaching them to celebrate the diversity that does and is going to surround them in life. We have to learn (and they use a split infinitive — I don’t know whether I should point that out or not — I guess I’m being judgmental!) we have to learn to not judge another person’s worth or validity as a human being based upon one aspect of who they are.” Oh, okay, we have an equality project that is taking place and that’s going on, and the subtlety of this is so pervasive. We’ll get to illustrations of others in just a minute.

The mayor of the city of London, celebrating diversity safeguarding equality: “London is a diverse and cosmopolitan city of people from different backgrounds. Its 7 million people encompass 14 faiths and 300 languages. Whatever religion, race, sex, age, disability, or sexuality, everyone should be able to live their lives free from discrimination.” Well, I agree with a hunk of that. I agree with a big part of that. There should not be the discrimination. He has established the London Partnership Register which allows both heterosexual and same-sex couples to register their partnerships. He has established it to act as an initial focus on policy development of equality of opportunity and the elimination of discrimination within the greater London area. He has established an equality budget process that assesses overall equality performance against expenditure every six months. What does that mean? Well, it means that if you’re not spending equal amounts on all, you’re in trouble — my understanding. Now they have a whole list of pro-cultural diversity. They sponsored the London Black Film Festival, St. Patrick’s Day Festivities, The Greenwich Asian Chinese New Year Celebration, Nottinghill Carnival, Black History Month, etc., etc.

Now, you should be aware also, that Islam is taking a position that it is accepting of all races and people. This is a statement made by the Imam of the Islamic Center of Raleigh, North Carolina — I'm not going to read the quote from the Koran here...”But with this verse, Islam declares equality among people. That is because Islam respects a human being for being human, not for any other reason. Islam does not distinguish between two races or two groups of people or between two colors.” Then it quotes a rather obscure passage where Mohammad makes a statement there's no preference given to Arab or non-Arab, as a background for saying “Islam accepts all people.” Okay, so what does all this mean? On this side, we have a cardinal pillar of the Reformed Faith saying God unconditionally elects His own and passes over the rest. On this side, we have a world galloping toward a position of no difference between any individual or person and if you do make a difference, there is to be a problem. We have grown up with a certain set of values that permeated our thinking and in order to sort of illustrate this, I'm going to read a real quick passage from *In Defense of Elitism* again:

It is fashionable these days to deride Calvinism as having been a force for smugness, or for the comfortable and dismissal of the afflicted. But if one strips away the theological component, early Calvinists left us a residue of acute perception. In general, the world is a rational place, in which winners on a whole deserve to win, and losers on a whole deserve to lose. It is only for the exceptions, the lives that are strikingly unfair, that we maintain the mediating devices of social welfare.

Well, that was the case; it's not anymore. Now, indulge me just a minute. I don't know whether I should do this or not, but what the heck, why not? Predictions. It wasn't that many Sundays ago when we had Gideon Sunday and we had a Gideon in our pulpit and the person speaking pointed out that they could no longer go down to the recruitment center and pass out Bibles to the new inductees into the military. You heard that from our pulpit. How long will it be until there will be no telecast of a worship service from a reformed church? I raise that as a question, but I also make a prediction — you have heard in the news that there is already a movement under foot to limit religious broadcasting and also to limit talk radio, because the conservatives have too much control and they have to be reined in and so something has to be done about it. I wonder, if we're up here talking about unconditional election and we're saying that either God chooses you or you go to hell — now, I'm saying this in a most abrasive fashion, so forgive me. I'll let Derek talk about theological election in its theological purity, okay? But if we're preaching that, may I give you an illustration?

Suppose a couple comes in for premarital counseling and let's suppose that she is a devout member of First Presbyterian Church. And let's suppose that he is a member of a different denomination that doesn't believe in unconditional election, and let's suppose God speaks to her heart and in the counseling the minister mentions that you should not be unequally yoked. And let's suppose that she,

because of a pricking of her conscience, says maybe I shouldn't marry this person because even though he claims to be a Christian, he really doesn't hold to the sovereignty of God and he really doesn't believe in a Reformed tradition, and she calls off the wedding. And then suppose the young man commits suicide in grief and despair. How far away are we from the church being sued because of its compliance in his rejection to cause him to do what he did? It seems illogical, it seems impossible, that that could happen — but how far away from that are we? I don't know, but that's one question. If churches teach an exclusive theology, i.e., unconditional election, how long until it will be labeled as illegal? When will that become a legal issue in our culture? It could happen. It could happen. Now, does that mean we stop teaching it? No, it does not, we go ahead. By the way, just to set the record clearly straight, I am optimistic about what's going to happen. I am not pessimistic, because I believe in the sovereignty of God. I believe that God's in charge, He's not surprised by what's happening, He knows exactly what's going on, but we need to be aware of what's going on. At what point, if churches teach that one should not be unequally yoked, how long until we are challenged legally with some form of defamation?

The church, by the way, and I do say this, the church should never tell a couple “You should not get a divorce.” What the church should say to the couple in the midst of a divorce situation is - it has two rules and responsibilities. Number one, it has the responsibility through its elders to speak to the couple and determine whether or not what is going on is in line with biblical teaching. Number two, to what degree do we feel like is there a probability of God blessing you in what you are about to do. What if a church says to a couple, “You cannot get a divorce. You do not have biblical grounds,” but let's suppose that everything hasn't been said, and let's suppose the wife is beaten up by the husband (although I have seen it both ways) and the family of the wife sues the church for making her stay in the marriage?

I have to tell you one — it's a true story, okay? In 37 years of doing what I do, I have had two situations occur in which I observed a wife come in and talk to me and tell me of having discovered a second husband — you know, divorce and remarried — having discovered a second husband videoing her daughter, not his, taking a shower. And one was for the purpose of selling it to the porn shop. It was purely for monetary gain. He was going to sell it. And by the way, neither wife got a divorce, because they felt they didn't have biblical grounds. My comment was, “Don't you dare let your daughter go back into the house with that guy!” But neither one saw fit to do that. Now suppose you tell her she can't, he can't, and suppose there is domestic violence. What is the liability of the counseling parties of the church? We have had legal cases in California where counseling that was taking place in the church, the church was liable for what was said when something bad happened. We're facing an interesting world out there.

Now, to pull back to what we're talking about — unconditional election. All of

these are relational issues and they have very valid reasons to be dealt with, don't get me wrong - but what about our theology? What happens if we are challenged in our theology? What happens that, if in today's world in diversity and accepting of difference, and in today's world of equality, what happens if we stand firm? I'll tell ya, I believe God will bless, and I believe that's what we are supposed to do. But as we look at the modern man's struggle with reformed theology, part of his struggle is: "It ain't fair! What you're taking about is a non-loving God. What you're talking about is not the thing that I want to worship." So that of this 85% of our population that say they have some affiliation with Christianity, it's a little sliver over here that believe what we're talking about. I say this to you because I really believe that we are about to face a different world - different only in that we haven't been through this passage before. There's a sense in which we're going back to the first century Christianity, where Christianity was not the accepted religion of the day and was even persecuted, and the legal authorities did not honor the precepts of Christianity. God blessed, didn't He? From 12, we have a whole world shaking movement that came, but let us not be deceived into thinking that we have a nice comfortable retirement in front of us for the church, waiting for the second coming.

Sometimes we think a parallel here — the church had to work real hard, sort of attained its high production years, and now we're into our retirement waiting for the Lord to come. I don't know if that's the case. I don't know if that's the case at all. But let's understand — we have a sovereign God, we have the Scripture, we have theology — let theology be our comfort, let theology be our guide, let theology be your friend, don't let it be a haughty enemy. Don't be afraid of your Reformed Theology, but do understand, it is not exactly a popular theology in today's world. Therefore, only God can change a human heart. "Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath, but because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive in Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ, and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages He might show the incomparable riches of His grace expressed in His kindnesses to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast."

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, again, I claim no expertise, but I do claim a strong desire to honor You and have Your people stand firm in the face of what is happening all around us. You are Lord over all. You are sovereign, and we believe firmly that You will come again, bodily, and there will be a resurrection, a bodily resurrection, and that You will take Your people, the elect. "Jacob, You have loved. Esau, You have hated." We cannot fathom the way Your mind works, but we can understand how You have set Your mind down for us in Your Word. Make us faithful to Your Scriptures, to Your Word, and give us the courage and

strength for the tide in which we have been swirling along. If it turns against us, and we pray it doesn't, but if it does, give us the confidence of the hope we have in Christ Jesus our Lord. In His name we pray. Amen.

Let's stand for the benediction and we'll be dismissed after the benediction. May grace, mercy and peace, from God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, rest and abide upon you and all of yours. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

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