

CORPORATE AND INDIVIDUAL ELECTION IN ROMANS 9: A RESPONSE TO BRIAN ABASCIANO

THOMAS R. SCHREINER*

It is gratifying to know that someone is still reading my article on Romans 9 more than ten years after its publication! Of course, it would be even more gratifying if Brian Abasciano agreed with me!¹ He does signal his agreement with my claim that Romans 9–11 “concerns the salvation of Israel,” but he differs with me regarding corporate election. I will argue below that Abasciano’s argument is flawed because the connection he draws between corporate election and the participation of individuals is unpersuasive both logically and biblically. Before I respond specifically, I would like to sketch in some elements of my previous article, for it will serve as the necessary background for my reply.

I. THE ISSUE IN ROMANS 9 IS SALVATION

The issue that concerns Paul in Romans 9–11 is the salvation of Israel, or more precisely, the fact that most Israelites in his day were unsaved. It is clear from Romans 8 that the promises originally given to Israel belonged to believers in Jesus Christ, and it seems that the majority of those who believed in Christ in Rome were Gentiles.² The eschatological gift of the Spirit had been given to Gentiles, signifying that the age of promise had arrived (cf. Rom 8:9–10). The new covenant promise that God’s law would be kept was being fulfilled in Gentile Christians (Rom 8:4; cf. Ezek 11:18–19; Jer 31:31–34). Believers in Jesus Christ are “sons of God” (*huiioi theou*, Rom 8:14, 19),³ God’s children (*tekna*, Rom 8:16, 17, 21), and adopted (*huiiothesia*, Rom 8:15, 23). They are God’s elect (*eklektoi*, Rom 8:33) and heirs (*klēronomoi*, Rom 8:17) and are assured of future glory (*doxa*, Rom 8:17, 18, 21).⁴ Those who believe in Jesus Christ are foreknown, predestined, called, justified, and glorified (Rom 8:29–30).

* Thomas Schreiner is professor of New Testament at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2825 Lexington Road, Louisville, KY 40280.

¹ I want to express my thanks to Bruce Ware and Jim Hamilton who read this article and suggested several ways to improve it.

² In support of the view that the majority are Gentiles, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 11–15.

³ All citations from Scripture, unless noted otherwise, are from the ESV.

⁴ The verb *sundoxazō* is used in Rom 8:17 instead of the noun *doxa*.

What is striking about these various terms is that they represent the promises that the Lord had given to Israel as his chosen people. In Romans 9–11 Paul answers the question as to whether God's saving promises made to Israel will be fulfilled. Have God's promises been exhausted in the Church of Jesus Christ, composed mainly of Gentiles? What happened to the promises that Israel would be God's elect son, the children of the Lord, his adopted one, and the heirs of the promise with the assurance of future glory? We see from the connection between Romans 8 and 9–11 that Paul does not digress from his argument in Romans 9–11 as some previous commentators claimed. Instead the salvation of Gentiles, which is so beautifully described in Romans 8, naturally raises the question that Paul answers in Romans 9–11. If the Church of Jesus Christ, composed mainly of Gentiles, has inherited the promises made to Israel in the OT, will God fulfill his saving promises to Israel?

We see, then, that the question Paul answers in Romans 9–11 is whether God's *saving* promises to Israel will be realized. He is not merely speaking of the historical destiny of Israel, if one severs Israel's historical destiny from its salvation. We have compelling evidence that the issue in Paul's mind throughout Romans 9–11 is the *salvation* of Israel, and he affirms emphatically that God will fulfill his saving promises (Rom 9:6). When Paul says that he is almost willing to be cursed for the sake of his fellow Israelites (Rom 9:3), the word "cursed" (*anathema*) refers to being cut off from Christ, that is, experiencing eternal judgment (cf. Gal 1:8–9).⁵ The reason Paul could almost wish to go to hell is because so many of his fellow Israelites were unsaved. Paul specifically informs the reader in Rom 10:1 that his longing is for the *salvation* of Israel. Paul's grief cannot be traced to Israel's political misfortunes, for Paul would not wish to be separated from Christ forever simply because Israel was suffering politically at the hands of the Romans or because Israel was not blessed with material prosperity. He is grieved because most of ethnic Israel was separated from Christ, and hence headed for destruction and final judgment (Rom 9:1–5).

The remainder of Romans 9–11, however, explains that God will fulfill his saving promises to Israel, as the thesis statement in Rom 9:6 clarifies: "But it is not as though the word of God has failed." The issue that Paul tackles in Romans 9–11 is the salvation of Israel, and he does not depart from answering that question in Romans 9! Instead he picks up the argument from Romans 8, arguing that the true seed of Abraham are the children of God (*tekna tou theou*, Rom 9:8), and the children of the promise (*tekna tēs epangelias*, Rom 9:8). When Paul refers to "the children of God," he always has in mind those who are *saved* (Rom 8:16, 21; Phil 2:15; Gal 4:28). So too, in Rom 9:11–12 Paul argues that God's election is not "by works but by him who calls." Elsewhere in Paul works are a *soteriological* issue (Rom 3:20, 27–28; 4:2, 6; 9:32; 11:6; Gal 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10; Eph 2:9; 2 Tim 1:9; Tit 3:5). In the same way, *calling*

⁵ Cf. H. W. Kuhn, "anathema," *EDNT* 1.80.

in Paul relates most often to the call to salvation (e.g. 1 Cor 1:9; Gal 1:6, 15; 5:8; 1 Thess 2:12; 4:7; 5:24).

The argument throughout Romans 9 relates to salvation, for Paul contrasts “vessels of wrath—prepared for destruction” with “vessels of mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory” (Rom 9:22–23). The word for destruction (*apōleia*) typically refers to eternal destruction in Paul—the destruction that will be meted out forever at the final judgment (Phil 1:28; 3:19; 2 Thess 2:3; 1 Tim 6:9). On the other hand, Paul often uses the word “glory” (*doxa*) to refer to eternal life (Rom 2:10; 8:18; 1 Thess 2:12; 2 Tim 2:10). Moreover, the word “mercy,” when linked with “glory,” almost certainly refers to God’s saving mercy that is bestowed upon his people.

What is vital to see is that Romans 9 cannot be separated from chapters 10–11. The chapters are a unity, and in all three of the chapters Paul explains how God’s *saving* purposes for Israel are realized. Paul does not swerve off onto another topic in Rom 9:30–10:21 where Israel is indicted for attempting to be saved by works instead of putting its faith in Jesus Christ. So too, in Rom 11:1–10 Paul introduces himself as an example of a saved remnant, and the presence of a remnant forecasts that God will do a greater work in the future. Indeed, Romans 11 climaxes with the eschatological promise that all Israel will be saved (Rom 11:26), which represents the fulfillment of God’s word to Israel per Rom 9:6.⁶

II. THE QUESTION OF CORPORATE ELECTION

1. *Abasciano’s understanding of the corporate entity and the individual.* Abasciano maintains that my view of Israel’s salvation is fundamentally correct but I go astray when it comes to corporate election. It is important to see that my discussion of corporate election follows the discussion of salvation, for the election in view in Romans 9–11 relates to Israel’s salvation. Israel’s salvation and corporate election are closely intertwined in these chapters. Furthermore, Abasciano captures the substance of my argument regarding corporate election, for I claim that the two are inseparable in Romans 9 so that it does not work to say that Paul speaks only of corporate election so that individual election is excluded.⁷ Instead what we have in Romans 9–11 is both corporate and individual election, for we cannot have the one without the other. If individuals are not elected, one cannot have a corporate group. It follows, then, that Paul may *focus* on corporate election without in the least suggesting that individual election is excluded. Indeed, I still claim that such a logical relation between corporate and individual election must be the case, for corporate and individual election are, as Frank Sinatra sang about love and marriage, logically inseparable. “You can’t have one without the other.”

⁶ The interpretation of Rom 11:26, of course, is fiercely debated. For more detailed support, see Schreiner, *Romans* 611–23.

⁷ I will argue below that there is also a sense in which corporate and individual election are separable in the OT, but even in this instance the saved remnant necessarily involves individuals.

Abasciano attempts to rebut my view by arguing that I have misunderstood the Arminian view of corporate election by explaining it too simplistically and that I erect a straw man to sustain the thesis I advance. Corporate election, he maintains, is primary and the focus, while individual participation in such corporate election is secondary. The stress on corporate election “must include individuals in its purview to some extent” (p. 2). But I have made the mistake, Abasciano says, of granting individual election the primacy rather than corporate election, when the reality is actually reversed. Hence, Abasciano claims that I have fallen prey to “a modern, western, individualistic viewpoint” (p. 3). Abasciano introduces a series of arguments to support his judgment, which I will turn to in due course, but his position stands or falls with the claim that corporate election is primary and individuals are included in some sense. But in what sense, in Abasciano’s view, are individuals included? Are individuals elected by God? Not according to Abasciano. He claims that there is no “overt use of the language of election unto salvation in reference to an individual” (p. 5), nor is there any “concept of direct election of individuals as individuals . . . anywhere in Paul or in the NT” (p. 6).

It is clear, then, that corporate election, according to Abasciano, does not also involve individual election. But that raises a further question. Just what is the relationship Abasciano sees between corporate election and the inclusion in some sense of individuals? How are individuals included in this so-called more nuanced view of corporate election? The answer finally surfaces on p. 12. Individuals enjoy the benefit of corporate election by faith. “Faith was always the means for the individual to truly possess the blessings of the corporate divine election” (p. 12). Corporate election is wrongly defined, Abasciano insists, if one thinks that what is true of the group is also true of every individual in the group. Individual participation is a secondary reality, and hence for individuals “membership in the Church *is based on faith*” (p. 19; *my italics*).

I am not opposed to saying in principle that corporate election is primary and individual election is secondary in Romans 9 since it seems to me that corporate election is inseparable from individual election. But it all depends upon what one means by the words one uses. The devil is in the details! According to Abasciano the focus is on corporate election, and then individuals participate in the group by faith. Here is the fundamental thesis in Abasciano’s argument, and it seems to me that his argument fails at this very point, as I will now explain.

According to Abasciano, corporate election refers to *God choosing* a group, but the individual dimension refers to *our choosing* to be in the group God has chosen. Now corporate and individual election are certainly related, but not in the way Abasciano claims. If the individual dimension of corporate election simply means that human beings believe in order to be saved, then there is no “election” in corporate election. Or, to put it another way, there is no election by God. All the electing is done by the individual when he or she chooses to be saved.

Abasciano might object, “But this objection fails because Schreiner has forgotten that God has elected corporately. There is an election by God.”

Furthermore, he could claim that he has already asserted that there is no such thing as individual election anyway, and so my objection simply repeats the alleged flaw in my original article. I will say more about what corporate election means shortly, but here I would like to point out the implausible connection Abasciano draws between corporate election and individual participation in such. According to Abasciano, corporate election means that God chooses a group, but God does not choose anyone personally and individually. Rather, individuals are elected only if they have faith. The strange connection Abasciano forges between the corporate and individual surfaces here, since corporate election refers to *God's choosing a group* in his understanding, but the individual dimension *focuses on individuals' choosing to belong to the group*. When we speak of corporate election Abasciano speaks of *God choosing*, but when it comes to individuals he now speaks of *humans choosing*. The reader could easily be confused since Abasciano says throughout the article that corporate election has individual ramifications. But all he means by this is that when individuals exercise faith and believe, they then benefit from corporate election.

Abasciano's formulation of the relationship between corporate election and individual participation is crucial, for the thesis of his article depends upon the link he forges between corporate election and individual participation in this election. According to Abasciano, all of God's work is wrapped up in corporate election, and we access the benefits of corporate election by individually believing. It is difficult for me to see how Abasciano's view differs in any respect from the traditional Arminian view (even though he says he "takes full account of the place of individuals," p. 2), for at the end of the day God's choice of a corporate group saves no one, and since there is no such thing as individual election, people access the benefits of corporate election only by believing. When I first read Abasciano, I thought he was attempting to say that his view of the relationship between the corporate and individual was more nuanced than the traditional Arminian view, that somehow individuals were included (at least in some vague sense) in corporate election. But a close reading of his article demonstrates that this is not the case at all, for corporate election only *makes possible* the salvation of individuals. Abasciano discerns the relationship between the group and the individual in radically different ways, since the corporate focuses on *God's work* and the individual elevates the role of *humans in believing*. I cannot see how this disjunctive relationship between the corporate and individual with regard to election differs substantially from the standard Arminian view.

III. THE PROBLEM WITH ABASCIANO'S DEFINITION OF CORPORATE ELECTION

Given what Abasciano says about the role of individuals (we become part of the group by believing), I return to what he means by corporate election. At this point I revert to what I said in my article since Abasciano's view represents a typical Arminian formulation. He thinks God chooses the group, and then individuals become part of the group by believing. It still seems to me

that this group or entity is an empty set or an abstract entity without any reality, for on Abasciano's terms, when God chooses the group, individuals are not yet part of the group. The participation of individuals in the group is based, he assures us, on faith. But then it must follow that when God chooses the group, no one is yet in the group. One cannot be part of the group before it is formed! And corporate election cannot mean that God simply recognizes those who believe, for then the word "election" is completely stripped of its meaning, and the notion of God choosing is erased from the word.

Corporate election, in Abasciano's scheme, works as follows. God chooses that there would be the Church of Jesus Christ. Then individuals choose to be part of this corporate group, that is, the Church. But let us imagine for a moment that no one chooses to believe, which is logically possible. If this were to be the case, the corporate group would have no one in it. The Church would be an empty set. God has chosen a thing, but there is no substance to what he has chosen. In fact, if no one believes it would not even exist. Indeed, until individuals believe on Abasciano's scheme, there is no one in the corporate group at all. If the corporate group is filled up on the basis of individuals believing, then it follows that the corporate group God has chosen is a nullity until people believe. All corporate election means, then, is that God chose that when people believed they would be part of the Church. God only chose that the entity called the Church would exist, but the fundamental issue, according to Abasciano, is the faith decision of individuals.

Let me say a word about the illustration I have previously used regarding a baseball team. No illustration works perfectly, but I introduced this illustration to demonstrate that the corporate and individual dimensions of election are logically inseparable, and I still think this point stands. Let us imagine, for the sake of argument, that God is choosing a baseball team. Abasciano's criticism of my illustration from the baseball team fails because his own assumptions color the way he perceives the illustration. He assumes that the team *already exists* when God chooses it. But we need to remember Abasciano's own view of election here. First, God has to choose the corporate team, and *then* the players choose to be members of the team. When God first chooses the team, players cannot *already be members of the team*. If that were the case, faith would exist *before* God makes his corporate choice. Abasciano's illustration from a baseball team only works because he assumes that God chooses an entity that already exists, but this contradicts his own view, since he insists that individual choice is what makes someone a member of God's saving group.

IV. INDIVIDUAL ELECTION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Abasciano rejects the very notion of individual election in his essay, even though he does not examine other texts because they are beyond the bounds of his discussion of Romans 9. I will be brief here as well since he does not defend his claim that individual election is non-existent in the NT, but it must be stated that if even one text were found that taught individual election, Abasciano's argument would fail. It is now well known in biblical scholarship

that theological concepts cannot be limited to words, as if the concept of election could be restricted to the word *eklogē*.⁸ The concept that God elects individuals could be demonstrated from a number of texts, but for space reasons I limit the discussion to three texts.

We see clearly in John 6 that faith is the gift of God given only to those whom God has chosen. Jesus says in verse 35, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." The words "comes" and "believes" in this sentence mutually interpret one another, so that both designate a coming and believing that saves, for those who come to Jesus and believe in him find life through his death.⁹ Two verses later we read, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out" (John 6:37). It is evident from verse 35 that "comes" is another way of speaking of believing. Furthermore, the coming and believing in both verses 35 and 37 clearly refer to the actions of individuals, for John uses the third person singular.¹⁰ Verse 37 also teaches that *all* those given by the Father to the Son will come to the Son, and that *all* those who come will be received by the Son. In other words, all those given by the Father to the Son will believe in the Son. The text does not say that *only some* of those given by the Father to the Son will come to the Son, but *all* of those given will come and believe. It is clear that not all human beings come to the Son, for not all believe.¹¹ So, only some come to the Son, and those who do come have been given by the Father to the Son, and *all those given by the Father to the Son come*, so that it follows that those who come do so *because* the Father has given them to the Son. Moreover, verse 44 clarifies that human beings who do not come to the Son have not been drawn by the Father: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." Those who do not come refuse to believe because they were not given by the Father to the Son. We can conclude, then, that John 6 teaches individual election unto salvation. All those given by the Father to the Son will come to faith, whereas those not drawn by the Father cannot and will not come.

Another text that contradicts Abasciano's view is Rom 8:30: "And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified." Here I want to call attention to the phrase, "those whom he called he also justified." Notice that Paul refers to persons here, saying that all those who are called are justified. We know from Pauline theology that no one is justified apart from faith (e.g.

⁸ Peter O'Brien rightly says, "The ideas of election and predestination are critical elements in the apostle's theological structure. Although the terminology is not used frequently, when it does appear it is organically connected with other fundamental ideas such as God's calling, will, purpose and counsel." See Peter O'Brien, "Was Paul a Covenantal Nomist," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism. Volume II: The Paradoxes of Paul* (ed. D. A. Carson, P. T. O'Brien, and M. A. Seifrid; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 257.

⁹ See John 6:51.

¹⁰ It has often been noted that John focuses on individuals in his Gospel. It will scarcely work here to say that the individuals here stand for corporate groups!

¹¹ The only escape would seem to be universalism, but John plainly disavows universalism, anticipating a final judgment in which some will be excluded from eternal life (cf. John 3:36; 5:28–29).

Rom 5:1). Yet Paul says here that all those who are called are justified. The word “called” (*ekalesan*) can scarcely mean “invited to be saved” here, for it is quite obvious that not all those who are invited to believe in Jesus are justified. Some will experience judgment on the last day as Paul teaches in many texts (e.g. Rom 2:5, 16; 3:5–6). Hence, the word “called” here must refer to an effectual calling, for according to Paul’s words in Rom 8:29 all those who are called are justified. Furthermore, it is evident that the calling is restricted only to some and not issued to all, since not all are justified. It follows, then, that calling must *create* faith since justification is by faith. Nor will it do for Abasciano to say that the plural is used here, and thus the text only refers to a corporate but not an individual calling. For it makes no sense to say that faith is a corporate decision, but not an individual one. What Paul teaches here is quite clear. God grants saving faith in his grace to some but not all, and those who thereby believe are justified. Abasciano rightly observes that most of the language about election in the NT is corporate, but he wrongly claims that no text teaches individual election, and he artificially separates corporate from individual election.

When it comes to Eph 1:4, “just as he [God] chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him in love,”¹² Abasciano maintains that “the election of Christ is surely part of the background and meaning of the verse” (p. 18). Such a statement is not necessarily at odds with my own view. The point I was trying to make in my previous article is that in Eph 1:4 human beings are the direct object of God’s election, not Jesus Christ. Hence, the emphasis in the verse is not on the election of Christ, but the election of human beings. Nor is Abasciano wrong to say that we are elect both instrumentally through Christ and by way of incorporation into Christ. What Paul does not emphasize in Eph 1:4, however, is that God chose Christ as the corporate head, and then the election of the church becomes a reality insofar as human beings put their faith in Jesus Christ. What Paul emphasizes in the verse is not Christ’s election (even if it is in the background), but the *election of believers*. Arminian interpreters place their emphasis on a matter that is unstated in the verse, and at the same time undercut Paul’s stress on divine election of human beings. It reminds me of a time when I was teaching a class on Ephesians, and I asked, “What is this verse teaching?” And one student replied, “It teaches that we must choose God to be saved.” I replied, “Does it not seem strange that the wording of the verse emphasizes just the opposite of what you said? It stresses *God’s choice*, not ours.” This is seen in Eph 1:5 as well, where as though to oppose the Arminian interpretation of God’s choice Paul adds that God “predestined us *according to the purpose of his will*.”

V. CORPORATE ELECTION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

One of Abasciano’s fundamental arguments is that election was corporate in the OT, and hence Paul would follow the pattern of the OT and Jewish

¹² The translation here is my own.

tradition. Even if we accept Abasciano's argument here, his interpretation would only be verified if his particular explanation of the relationship between the corporate and individual is sustained. I have already argued above that his view fails, and hence claiming that election is fundamentally corporate in the OT scarcely demonstrates the plausibility of his view. I would agree that the emphasis in the OT is on corporate election; the problem is with Abasciano's delineation of the relationship between the corporate and individual.

But I would also argue that there is a difference between corporate election in the OT and the NT.¹³ The issue here is quite complex, and it is presented well and in detail by Paul Jewett in another work, and so I can only state the case here.¹⁴ Israel in the OT was both the people of God and a theocratic entity—a nation. Not all of those within Israel had a circumcised heart, that is, many in Israel belonged to the nation politically but were not truly members of God's people spiritually. Hence, the corporate election of Israel was not inextricably linked to the spiritual renewal of God's people. But the new covenant that God has made with his people, the Church of Jesus Christ, is different (Jer 31:31–34). Now every member of the covenant community knows the Lord. Nor does this sustain Abasciano's view of election, for the text in Jeremiah makes it clear that *God* writes the law on the heart of his people. What distinguishes the old covenant from the new is not ultimately human faith, but the grace of God in granting his people a new heart and the gift of the Spirit (Ezek 11:18–19; 36:26–27).¹⁵ Abasciano's claim that the notion of corporate election found in the OT is determinative for Romans 9, therefore, fails, inasmuch as it overlooks the discontinuity in the notion of corporate election between the OT and the NT.

The same flaw applies to Abasciano's discussion of the remnant. The remnant consists in those who have a circumcised heart in Israel (see Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4). They are the true people of God that reside in the corporate entity called Israel. Furthermore, I am puzzled why God needs to choose a remnant on Abasciano's terms. After all, corporate election is only secured when individuals believe. Why do we need a remnant within the corporate group when, according to Abasciano, individuals benefit from corporate election by believing? On his terms we have two groups where corporate election is validated by faith (Israel as a corporate group *and* the remnant), which seems like an unnecessary multiplication of entities.

In addition, Abasciano overstates his case. There are examples of individual election in the OT, for Abraham was elected individually by God. Nehemiah 9:7 states this clearly: "You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name

¹³ Even if one does not accept my particular argument here, the other flaws in Abasciano's argument remain.

¹⁴ Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

¹⁵ Abasciano might claim that my argument fails since some in the new covenant community apostatize. But I would argue that none of those who are truly elect commit apostasy. See Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).

Abraham.” The same truth is conveyed in Josh 24:3 in a context which emphasizes that Abraham came from a family of idolaters: “Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many.” The emphasis here is on God’s action in removing Abraham from idolatry, and hence the individual election of Abraham clearly relates to his salvation.¹⁶

In the same way, Isaac and Jacob were individually chosen by God. I do not deny that in Rom 9:7–9 the election of Isaac and Jacob has corporate ramifications, but their election was individual and not corporate! Abasciano claims that “*individuals* would be regarded as part of the covenant people based on their relationship to Isaac” (p. 4). But Paul argues *against* this view in Romans 9, when he states that mere biological descent from Abraham *does not* mean that one is part of the covenant people (Rom 9:6–13). Abasciano claims Paul argues corporately, so that the point is that God chose the nation of Israel rather than Edom. His flawed understanding of corporate election vitiates his argument, so that he fails to discern Paul’s main point. Yes, election has corporate dimensions, but Paul’s point in Romans 9 goes deeper. Mere physical descent from Abraham or Isaac does not prove that an *individual* is elect, for God never promised that the whole nation of Israel *corporately without exception* would receive the blessing of salvation. There has always been a winnowing process. The corporate group has always been composed of individuals whom God has chosen. The flow of the argument clarifies that Paul thinks of individual election, not just corporate election. He chose Isaac as an individual instead of Ishmael. Both were descendants from Abraham, but the Lord did not choose the descendants of Abraham as a group. Instead he chose Isaac rather than Ishmael, and he chose Jacob rather than Esau. And Paul applies this *principle* to all of history, even to his own day.

What about the singulars in Romans 9? Abasciano claims that these singulars should be interpreted corporately, and complains that I did not deal with this in sufficient detail in my article. Let me say at this point that I am in agreement with Piper’s argument to which he refers, which I think establishes clearly the individual referent.¹⁷ Moreover, we have already seen that the OT teaches the individual election of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Romans 9 confirms the individual election of Isaac and Jacob. Abasciano faces a difficult problem here, for he insists that all the singulars in Romans 9 *must be interpreted corporately* according to his understanding of corporate

¹⁶ The verb “take” (*laqach*) is used elsewhere of God taking an individual with the notion of choosing or selecting that person (Abraham [Gen 24:7]; Amos [Amos 7:15]; Zerubbabel [Hag 2:23]; David [2 Sam 7:8; 1 Chr 17:7; Ps 78:70]; Nebuchadnezzar [Jer 43:10]). The verb is also used of God taking or choosing the Levites (Num 3:12; 8:16, 18). Most of these instances, of course, do not relate to God choosing one for salvation. Whether such a notion is in view must be determined by the context. I would argue, however, that salvation is in view in both verses where Abraham is said to be taken.

¹⁷ My article says more briefly (and probably not as well) what Piper argues for in his work in detail. See John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).

election (which means that no individuals are elected by God). But given the OT teaching on the election of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the emphasis on the election of Isaac and Jacob in Romans 9, it is more natural to interpret the singulars the way I do. They indicate that God elects individually to salvation. This does not rule out the corporate dimension, of course, since the corporate and individual are inextricably intertwined. But for Abasciano's case to be established there must not be any reference to individual election at all, even though singulars are used!

Abasciano also makes another hermeneutical mistake. He assumes that if the OT refers to corporate election, then Paul must follow the same line of argumentation in Romans 9. But we cannot straitjacket the use of the OT in this manner, for what is decisive is the flow of argument in the NT epistle. Two illustrations might help. The apostasy of Israel in the wilderness was a corporate apostasy, but both Paul and the author of the Hebrews apply it to *individual Christians* (1 Cor 10:1–13; Heb 3:12–4:13).¹⁸ In Hebrews 12, as in Romans 9, Esau is used to illustrate the fate of one who is unsaved. Even if one were to argue that the OT reference to Esau is only corporate (which I contest), it does not necessarily follow that the same is true in the NT application of the text. In Romans 9 the singulars and the flow of the argument demonstrate that Paul is thinking of individuals, when he speaks of the one upon whom God shows mercy and the one whom he hardens (Rom 9:18). To claim that the singulars actually focus on the corporate whole, therefore, fails.

Nor does Abasciano rightly integrate Rom 9:30–10:21 in the argument. Here Paul focuses on the failure of Israel to believe. We need to remember that Romans 9–11 is a unity, whether Paul refers to election or believing. Notice that Abasciano shifts the focus from the corporate to the individual when Paul speaks of the need to believe in Rom 9:30–10:21, but he concentrates on the corporate when he discusses election in Romans 9. But Paul still refers to Israel corporately in Rom 9:30–10:21, so why does Abasciano suddenly move from the corporate to the individual? He might reply that faith is an individual decision. I would agree. But there is no hermeneutical basis for seeing a focus on both the corporate and individual decision in Rom 9:30–10:21 and for minimizing the individual dimension in Rom 9:1–23. Indeed, Rom 9:30–10:21 indicates that my understanding of the relationship between the corporate and the individual makes better sense than Abasciano's. For I claim that the corporate and individual are logically bound together.¹⁹ You cannot have a corporate group without the individual. A corporate group of

¹⁸ Incidentally, I think the event is both corporate and individual in the OT, too (witness that Joshua and Caleb are exceptions), but I am using Abasciano's categories here.

¹⁹ Abasciano thinks I contradict my point in Rom 9:30–10:21 since corporate Israel is not co-extensive with those in Israel who believed. Hence, the corporate and individual are not intertwined in the way I claim. I would note in response that the covenant community in the OT differs from the church in the NT. All members of the covenant community in the NT are believers, and hence the corporate and individual are co-extensive. Such is not true of the OT covenant community, for it was both a political and theocratic entity and a faith community. Not all those who belonged to the former participated in the latter.

believers cannot exist if individuals do not believe, and so too corporate election cannot exist without individual election.

VI. THE CHARGE OF INDIVIDUALISM

Abasciano charges my view with being individualistic and western and claims that his view reflects the culture of the first century. But it seems to me that the reverse is the case. It is his view that focuses on individual choice and faith so that he can even describe such faith as the basis of election and say that "membership in the Church is based on faith" (p. 19). Abasciano focuses on the faith of the individual as the basis of salvation, and this is a remarkably individualistic notion. Indeed, his notion of corporate election is completely irrelevant to individuals unless they believe, and so the choice of individuals to be saved is what is decisive. I fail to see, therefore, that Abasciano's view in any practical sense reflects the corporate worldview of the NT era better than my own. Indeed, the notion that God chooses who will be saved stands as a stark reminder that individual human choices are not ultimate in the universe. I am also convinced, of course, that individuals must believe to be saved. All people everywhere are to repent and put their trust in Jesus Christ to be spared from God's wrath on the last day. But the Scriptures also teach that God grants faith as a gift (Eph 2:8–9), and that those who are chosen by God will surely believe (e.g. John 6:35, 37, 44, 64–65; 10:26; Acts 13:48; Rom 8:29–30).

VII. THE ISSUE OF LOGIC

Abasciano agrees with me that we must uphold the law of non-contradiction. But he claims that the notion that God determines who will believe, and at the same time judges those who fail to believe because they *should* have believed, is a contradiction.²⁰ I argue that no contradiction exists here because we have a mystery analogous to the mystery of the Trinity. Abasciano rejects my view because, philosophically, mystery "should be reserved for realities in which we do not know how something works, but in which there is no logical contradiction." He claims the doctrine of the Trinity is not contradictory because it is not a contradiction to say that there are three persons and one being, but my view fails, according to Abasciano, because it is a contradiction to say that God predetermines all things and also to say that human beings make authentic choices.

It should be noted that Abasciano thinks my view is contradictory because his *definition of freedom* differs from mine. Abasciano defends libertarian freedom which means that people have the ability to choose the contrary. I would argue, however, along with Calvin and Edwards (and the Calvinist

²⁰ Acts 2:23 contains the very tension Abasciano rejects. Jesus' death was predestined by God, and yet God charges those who killed him with guilt (cf. Acts 4:27–28). Apparently, the biblical writers did not see a contradiction where Abasciano does.

tradition) for a compatibilistic view of freedom. Human beings are free when they choose in accordance with their nature, when they do what they wish to do. It is not my purpose to defend such a view of freedom here, but Abasciano is correct in saying that my view is contradictory if libertarian freedom is true. But I would argue that libertarian freedom does not accord with logic or the Scriptures (cf. Acts 2:23), and hence his objection on this point fails.

The issue of mystery that Abasciano raises is complex and deserves a more detailed treatment than can be given here, for it raises the problem of evil and the role of mystery in theology. I do not think we should quickly resort to mystery in theological formulation, and it is imperative that the mystery be located where Scripture establishes it. I merely want to say in response to the specific argument of Abasciano that he has scarcely demonstrated in his assertions that we can grasp why the Trinity is not contradictory. He blithely claims that the logical problems of the Trinity are solved because we know there are three persons but one divine being. I think he has formulated the doctrine of the Trinity rightly, but we need to remind ourselves that our understanding of what we mean by “persons” and “essence” or “being” is limited by our finitude. Are we saying that we have truly logically solved the nature of the Trinity because we say there are three and one, and the three and one must be distinguished? I believe, of course, that there are three persons and one divine essence, but it is not clear to me that the problem has been logically solved simply by saying “three” and “one” and “persons” and “essence.” What we mean by these terms exceeds our understanding. I do not think the doctrine of the Trinity is logically contradictory, but how it fits together is mysterious—beyond our comprehension.²¹ So, too, God determines all things, but human choices are authentic and genuine. Note what is not being said. I am not saying that God’s choices and our choices *are the same thing*. God makes choices, and we make choices, and yet there is not a contradiction between the authenticity of our choices and the determination of all things by God. We cannot grasp how this is so, for we do not fully grasp how divine choices work, but it is not a logical contradiction to say that our choices are fully authentic, even if we cannot fully explicate how this could be the case. For neither can we explain satisfactorily how there is one God and yet three persons. Abasciano minimizes one side of the equation. He destroys the biblical tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, leaving us with only human responsibility. This approach fails to explain a myriad of texts.²²

VIII. CONCLUSION

Abasciano apparently thinks he has presented a more nuanced understanding of the relation between corporate election and the role of individuals.

²¹ For a clear explication of the doctrine of the Trinity, see Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity in Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2004).

²² See D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981).

I fail to see, however, that it differs in any substantive way from the standard Arminian view, for when we come to his downpayment time we see that God elects the Church corporately, but his election of the Church only applies to individuals when they believe. Abasciano does a fine job of presenting his view, but at the end of the day it has the same failings that have always afflicted the Arminian interpretation. It denies individual election when the NT clearly teaches such, and we have seen that individual election is in the OT as well. Corporate election is rendered meaningless, on Abasciano's scheme, for it constitutes the election of an empty set—a nullity. All the emphasis is placed on human faith, and the grace of God in electing his people to salvation is erased. Ironically enough, though Abasciano speaks of corporate election, his emphasis falls on the decisions of individuals, so that he falls prey to western individualism rather than exalting divine sovereignty. We maintain the view of the Scriptures and of Romans 9 if we teach that election is both individual and corporate, and that these are logically inseparable. Most important, we are reminded that God receives all the glory for our salvation. We put our faith in Christ because God elected us before the foundation of the world. One of Augustine's favorite verses in his controversy with Pelagius was 1 Cor 4:7, and I conclude my response with it: "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?"