

TRUTH VS ERROR

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THOUGHTS ON THE DOCTRINE OF ELECTION

1. Introductory Remarks

Twenty-four years ago, when president of a young people's federation and of a local young people's society, a very influential ecclesiastic and "master of Israel" made a personal attack on us for preaching and teaching the doctrine of predestination, election and reprobation. For this the writer was regarded as inimical to the spiritual welfare of the young people and as suffering from a not incurable immaturity. For with the advance of riper years, youthful dotings on imagined theologies would disappear. Since that time we have found that in certain circles the strongest opposition to this truth comes from those who know the least about it, having never made it the object of fair investigation. However, we have known others whose hearts were opened to the truth, their prejudices removed and who found grace to give diligence to make their calling and election sure.

This is a fundamental truth. It is a fundamental of the Christian faith, an essential and indispensable element of the faith. Yet, it is strange that those called Fundamentalists and who pride themselves in being great defenders of the faith, do not give a place to this basic fundamental, the doctrine of election. Strange, that the Fundamentalists omit this keystone fundamental; yet not so strange when we understand that, doctrinally, they are almost to a man Arminian. What is so detrimental about this is that one who simply must be classed as Arminian is either a determined or a tacit enemy of the truth. But among its friends, the best instructors in systematic theology have always begun their doctrinal works, first with a dissertation on the attributes of God, then continued with a treatise on the eternal counsel of God. Perhaps the writer suffers from an incurable immaturity, for through the years, after comparing the works of the great predestinarians with those of the moderns, he has come to believe that the method above referred to has never been, nor can be, improved. God is God and over against Him man is nothing and less than nothing. God is always first. God's counsel is always first. None can be His counselor. He is before all things. His counsel is before creation, before man, before the fall. An architect has his own plans in mind before he draws them up. He draws his plans before he begins to build. Yet how inadequately this illustrates the high and mighty Architect of the universe whose counsel is no dead, mechanical blueprint, but the eternal, sovereign, living will of the living God! According to His own will He has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass before the creation of the universe. From all eternity He has determined all things in the secret counsel of His eternal purpose. Yet this secret counsel he has not kept and caused to remain a secret, but has revealed it in His own Word of grace. There is revealed His eternal purpose, the end which He has purposed, together with all the means ordained to that end.

A building in the process of construction may often seem to resemble a shambles, its hideous, somewhat bomb-blasted appearance obscured with an equal, or only slightly less hideous scaffolding, in all, so far, revealing no order nor design. In fact, to begin with, there is much more design apparent in the scaffolding than in the building. Most spectators are content to gape at the, to them, meaningless disarray of stone and steel. Rarely have they the curiosity, much less the interest, to scan the master plan, which would furnish them with a view of the finished edifice and so seeing the end from the beginning, would have that which so mystified them made plain. It similarly follows with a knowledge of God's eternal counsel. Ignorance of

the decree of God will render history an insoluble riddle. The basic question to the issue at hand is whether God works all things according to the counsel of His own will or whether He is often governed by chance; whether the call of the Gospel makes an uncertain sound or whether it is sure to all the seed which the Lord has blessed; whether God prevails or man prevails; whether the evil is always subservient to the good or whether throughout time the antithesis between good and evil must be left indeterminate; whether the Lord depends upon His own almighty will or the puny will of the creature; whether all things, whatsoever comes to pass, has been infallibly and immutably fixed in God's eternal decree or whether God and His universe are bound by a merciless fate.

The doctrine of election takes us back to the beginning of all things, to the decree of the covenant, where God decreed His dwelling with many glorified sons, decreed the preaching of the Gospel, the coming of Christ, the fall of man, the creation and the entrance of sin into the world. It takes us back to the starting point, where God begins, where man, too, must begin, if he would have a right view of life and have an understanding of the truth. Being foundational truth, anything not established upon it is built on sinking sand. Any thinking not in harmony with this truth will according to the degree of deviation be faulty. Departure from this fundamental truth will result in fundamental error and fundamental misunderstanding. The Gospel will not be understood. Indeed, without election, there is no Gospel. With such a departure, the atonement will not be understood. In fact, without election, there is no atonement. Neither will there be understanding of God's purpose in sending His Son, of the mysteries of God's providence, of His promises or of what is even more fundamental, His covenant.

It is, admittedly, a difficult doctrine. This is especially so in the understanding of it. Many sit under a non-doctrinal preaching ministry where the truth at best is presented topically, but at that, not comprehensively. So that even if the hearers have the ability to search, sift, collate, classify and index, the scattered statements from the pulpit furnish nothing of this truth. Needed is regular, systematic preaching, according to the confessions, where this truth has an orderly setting forth. Still, the acceptance of it is not easy. For even when the mind grasps what the Scripture teaches on the subject, the heart rebels against such pride-abasing truth. The natural mind is enmity against God and His revelation, which enmity is especially manifested in prejudice against this particular truth. Only the grace and power of the Holy Spirit can remove this opposition to His Word. Further, the preaching of this truth is not a simple task. The novice is not one to handle it competently. Sharp tools do not belong in the hands of children or fools. It is not "for curious and carnal persons, lacking the Spirit of Christ, to have...before their eyes the sentence of God's predestination", for such only wrest the Scriptures to their own destruction (Art. 17, "Of Predestination and Election", The Thirty-nine Art. Of Relig., Ch. Of Eng.).

But difficulties should not discourage us, nor deter us from investigating what God has revealed on this truth. There is nothing unnecessary taught in Scripture, nor is there anything not beneficial to know. Where the Lord ceases to teach, we should relinquish our desire to learn. But whatever is declared in Scripture, we must be careful not to refuse or withhold from God's people. "We can know only as much about predestination as God has seen fit to reveal. It is important we know *that* much". "Buy the truth and sell it not" (Prov. 23:23) is a price many are unwilling to pay. Too occupied with television or other worldly pursuits, they have no time for prayerful and careful study of God's Word. But these difficulties are only insurmountable to the lazy. Especially the minister, but also the believer, is called to expend effort to be a workman that needs not to be ashamed, because he knows how to cut a straight path through the Word of truth.

No truth is more important than this one. Upon the book of election there stands inscribed at the head of its register the name of the Son of God. If there were no eternal election, there would be no Jesus Christ and if no Jesus Christ, then no Gospel; with no Gospel, no people chosen in Christ and so no salvation of any part of the race. But the Gospel, the plan of redemption and the whole eternal purpose of God for the entire universe have their origin in divine election. For as our Canons of Dort (I, 9) remind us: “election is the fountain of every saving good, from which flows forth faith, holiness and the other gifts of salvation and finally eternal life itself”. Out of this fountain God has from all eternity blessed His chosen church with all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies in Christ, according as He has chosen us in Him before the creation of the universe. This being so, election is of the most blessed truth. Election is before all blessings, the fountain of every blessing. Those blessings the elect have already out of eternity because they are in Him and they are in Him because they are chosen in Him. Therefore, to shut out this truth is to rob the people of God of their most glorious hopes and prospects.

Calvin should be heard on this point: “We shall never be clearly convinced as we ought to be, that our salvation flows from the fountain of God’s free mercy, till we are acquainted with His eternal election, which illustrates the grace of God by this comparison, that He adopts not all promiscuously to the hope of salvation, but gives to some what He refuses to others. Ignorance of this principle evidently detracts from the divine glory and diminishes real humility...If we need to be recalled to the origin of election to prove that we obtain salvation from no other source than the mere goodness of God, they who desire to extinguish this principle do all they can to obscure what ought to be magnificently and loudly celebrated...” (Inst. III, XXI, 1).

Despite the fact that blessing comes to us in no other way than through election, it is, to many, the most distasteful doctrine. Even when it is clearly and scripturally presented, they will not have it. Such frequent biblical terms as “predestinated”, “elect”, “chosen”, occurring in Scripture ought to lead them to conclude that the infallible Word of God teaches that all things come to pass by the sovereign good pleasure of God. But plain Scripture is not enough for them. This is the doctrine they hate the most. The natural man will not have it because it extols God too highly and abases proud man too low, to the dust. It makes God everything and man nothing. Men of the world, enemies of the church bitterly hate the doctrine of eternal punishment. Yet, there are professing Christians within the church who, more than enemies without, loathe, despise, vilify, misrepresent and revile God’s sovereign election. How they detest the truth that the salvation of the righteous is not of the will of man, but of the will of God (Jn. 1:13; Rom. 9:16)! How they rage when it is taught that the sinner is so dead in sins that the elect themselves must be made alive and made willing in the day of God’s power (Ps. 110:3)! They will corrupt young people with humanism, before they will permit them to be indoctrinated in this truth. They will destroy an entire church before they will brook such preaching from its pulpit. They will wreck a whole denomination before they leave the truth of predestination in peace.

Where election is the most vehemently denied, the free will of fallen man is the most loudly proclaimed. The Roman Catholic Church denounces predestination in these words: “No one ought to presume that he is assuredly in the number of the predestinate. For except by special revelation, it cannot be known whom God hath chosen unto Himself” (Condensed from the decrees of the Council of Trent, XII). Nor has Rome ever retracted its curses upon Protestants, one of which bearing on this issue is: “If any one says that after Adam’s sin, the free will of man is lost and extinguished...let him be anathema” (ibid., Justification, V). The agents

of the pope are responsible for the martyrdom of such great Calvinists in the reformed Church of England as Cranmer, Ridley, Latimer, Philpot and Bradford. The latter, persecuted by the papists in and out of prison, incarcerated with Arminians, then called “free will men”, debated Calvinism with them and therefore knew firsthand that “more hurt will come by them than ever came by the papists. In free-will they are plain papists, yea, Pelagians”. (To be continued, D. V.)

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