

Article reprinted from *CrossWay* Issue Spring 1988 No. 28

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

ELECTION – GOD’S CHOICE OF WHOM HE WILL SAVE

By Gerald Burrows

In the previous article in this series [*The Total Depravity of Human Nature*, Issue No. 26] we were shown the true extent of the desperate plight of men and women: the awesome judgment of God which rests upon them because of their sin: their complete inability to save themselves from the condemnation of hell: the utter helplessness of their wills to enable them to repent of their sin and lay hold upon Christ by faith: the hopelessness of their ever changing their own natures in order to delight in God’s way of salvation and be saved. Who then obtains repentance and faith and a new nature fashioned after the likeness of Christ? The Holy Spirit answers: ‘as many as were ordained to eternal life believed’ (Acts 13:48). Jesus said: ‘All that the Father has given me’ (John 6:37). ‘Which were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.’ (John 1:13) ‘According as he has chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love.’ (Eph. 1:4) The Bible points us to the free and unconditional choice by God Himself of those whom He will save. The salvation of men and women does not depend upon their helpless wills but ‘the good pleasure of God’s will’ (Eph. 1:5, 11).

Those whom God has purposed to save are given all things necessary for salvation. As Article XVII expresses it so well: ‘Pre-destination to Life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) he hath constantly decreed by his counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honour. Wherefore, they which be endued with so excellent a benefit of God be called according to God’s purpose by his Spirit working in due season: they through Grace obey the calling: they be justified freely: they be made sons of God by adoption: they be made like the image of his only- begotten Son Jesus Christ: they walk religiously in good works, and at length, by God’s mercy, they attain to everlasting felicity.’ (Eph. 1:3-11; Rom. 8:29,30; Rom. 9:21; Eph. 2:10; Phil. 2:12; 13).

God’s will and purpose

Let us note first that God’s choice (election) of those whom He saves is ‘constant’ (unchanging) and stems from His own everlasting purposes. This means that it is the unchanging purpose of God that secures the believer’s complete salvation and not his uncertain faith. Secondly, God’s choice is *personal*: ‘who hath saved *us*, and called *us* with an 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.’ 2 Tim. 1:9. Thirdly, God’s choice of those whom He saves is *unconditional*, and not based upon foreseen faith, good works or perseverance in faith. All these are the fruits of God’s election, which is ‘according to the purpose of him who works all things after the counsel of his own will’ (Eph. 1:11). ‘So then it is not of him that wills, nor of him that runs, but of God that shows mercy’ (Romans 9:16).

These words make plain that the mercy of God is not something which we can obtain by the most diligent labours either religious or moral. Rather we have forfeited all right to the mercy of God which would deliver us from hell. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves. If we are to be saved at all it must be by the mercy and grace of God alone freely shown to us in Christ: it is an ‘election of grace, and if by grace then it is no more of works . . .’ (Romans 11: 5, 6).

Many feel that the doctrine of God's unconditional election is too difficult to reconcile with man's free agency and the proclamation of the Gospel to all the world. Because of this many have rejected this doctrine as not essential to the Gospel witness. Yet the Reformers found that this was the rock against which the pride of men and every system based upon works foundered. As W.H. Griffith Thomas once wrote: 'The doctrine (of predestination) was the theological implication of the very heart of the Reformation; indeed, that movement was in a sense the product of the doctrine rather than the doctrine of it... The whole Reformation movement was subjective, spiritual, and practical, and did not concern itself with mere speculation, and it was on this account that the doctrine of predestination was realised as of vital and supreme importance.' (The Principles of Theology). Indeed this doctrine has come into prominence at times of great revival in the past. Why? Because it glorifies God alone. It is essential to the gospel of grace without works. 'Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is *God* that justifieth' (Rom. 8:33).

Mission

Rather than a discouragement to missionary effort the doctrine of election is an encouragement to it. Paul says: 'Therefore I endure all things for the elect's sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.' (2 Tim. 2:10; Acts 18:9-10). We are to submit our reason as well as tradition to the *whole* of God's Word. We must beware of not going far enough in setting forth the whole counsel of God as well as going beyond Scripture in our reasoning. The doctrine of election ought to control our methods of evangelism.

Those who fear that the sentence of God's predestination will leave them in a state of sin to be justly condemned must take heed to the promises and warnings of Scripture: 'All that the Father gives me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.' (John 6:37; Matt. 11:28, 29).

Predestination is to holiness and to good works. It is only as we display these as part of our new nature, that we 'make our calling and election sure' (2 Peter 1:10). We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, so that we might be 'to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved'.

Above all the doctrine of election and predestination is 'full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons, and such as feel in themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ, mortifying the works of the flesh, and their earthly members, and drawing up their mind to high and heavenly things, as well because it doth greatly establish and confirm their faith of eternal Salvation to be enjoyed through Christ, as because it doth fervently kindle their love towards God' (Article XVII)

Gerald Burrows is a member of All Saints Preston and a lecturer at Blackburn Polytechnic.