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THE 39 ARTICLES

A FAITH FOR TODAY (5) ARTICLE 17: PREDESTINATION & ELECTION

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Predestination and election are subjects which always seem to arouse great passions. Often in discussion on this issue much more heat is produced than light. Many of us will have heard of people being attacked as 'Calvinist' or 'Arminian', almost as if these titles described some particularly evil form of immorality or denied the very existence of God.

On one side of the argument those who stress man's dignity and his being made in the image of God cling stubbornly to their insistence of free will. "I have the freedom to choose; I chose to follow Christ; it's a matter of choice and we're all free to choose our own way; how could God ask us to choose Christ if He doesn't give us free will?" On the other side we find a stress on the sovereignty of God and the fallenness of man. "No-one can possibly go against God's will; He chose us in Christ, so we cannot possibly make the choice for ourselves; our wills are so enslaved by sin that we aren't free to choose at all."

The 'Arminians' accuse the 'Calvinists' of not being interested in evangelism: "They say that God chooses who He will save, that we don't have any choice in the matter, that human responsibility doesn't really exist, that it's no use asking for decisions or Christian commitment." The 'Calvinists' accuse the 'Arminians' of ignoring the sovereignty of God and of preaching 'Easybelievism'. "They think it's just a matter of an easy superficial decision, that we can deal with sin ourselves, that salvation is really a matter of man's decision not of God's".

The argument can go on for a very long time. It often focuses on apparently contradictory texts like 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy' (Romans 9: 15) and 'God our Saviour ... wants all men to be saved' (1 Timothy 2: 3-4).

God's determination to save

The Thirty-nine Articles are a marvellous example of balanced biblical truth on this issue. They take full account of all the teachings of Scripture and present the overall picture very fairly. (In this they actually follow closely the teaching of the much-maligned genius John Calvin - but not of some of his followers, who grossly overstated and oversimplified the truths he taught).

The first paragraph of Article 17, especially the second and third sentences, provide one of the best summaries of the biblical teaching on salvation to be found anywhere. These words describe not only God's will for his people but also his plan and determination to put it into action. And if He did not determine to save me, there is no way I could be saved.

The Bible is clear that God's predestinating and electing love, his choice to save us, is the only possible basis for our salvation. In so many places it makes plain that we cannot save ourselves, deal with our own sin, or even choose to follow Christ without his help at every stage of the way. The whole history of salvation, in Old and New Testaments, is the story of God's choice, his sovereign purposes. He chose and called Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, David, the prophets. On the grand scale He chose the whole people of Israel. In each case there was no goodness or godliness in them which led to his choosing; it was an act of his pure unmerited love.

All these Old Testament choices pointed to Christ. God was choosing these people to be the ancestors and the bearers of the promise, his chosen one, his Messiah or Christ. In the New Testament Jesus himself is the elect one. We are described as being chosen in him. He is the focus of God's choice; all those seen as predestined or chosen are described as being in Christ. Apart from Him we cannot be chosen.

Secure in Christ

It is the fact that we have been chosen in Christ that explains our faith in Him (faith is, after all, His gift) and that gives us grounds for assurance. How can I know I'm going to heaven? Because I know that Christ died for me, that I am one of those chosen by God in Christ to receive the benefits for which He died. If my eternal salvation depended on the strength and lasting quality of my choice, there would be little hope for me; because it rests on the solidity and constancy of God's choice, I can be completely secure.

The second paragraph of Article 17 points out that the doctrine of predestination is 'full of sweet, pleasant and unspeakable comfort to Christians and to those who feel within themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ.' We are meant to be assured, when we have evidence of God's work in our lives, that He has set His love upon us and will never let us go. Predestination isn't meant to be a controversial doctrine but an encouraging one. God's sentence that He has chosen us in Christ shouldn't make our hackles rise but should be heard as a 'comfortable word'.

Receiving God's promises

But there are those who reject the idea of predestination out of hand, often claiming that it is offensive. The Article deals with two groups of objectors. First are the non-Christians, referred to at the end of the second paragraph as 'inquisitive and unspiritual persons' (the word 'inquisitive' means meddling in matters which should not be their concern). The teaching here is simple: that a deep truth like this serves to confuse or alienate unbelievers, because it is not for them. Just as Jesus told His parables so that the faithful would understand but the scoffers would not, so here is a truth which can only be received by those of a humble heart. Many preachers have taken this to mean that predestination or election should never be mentioned except to an all-Christian congregation. That is not what it says, and both Jesus and Peter clearly preached predestination to very mixed crowds. But we are warned that unbelievers may well not like it.

Second come the Christian objectors to the doctrine. They are dealt with in the short third paragraph of Article 17, with a polite but firm reminder that we are to submit to the teaching of Scripture whether we like it or not: for there alone do we find the truth and the way of salvation.

Some Christians also object to the doctrine on the grounds that it stops people doing evangelism; how can we share the gospel with others if God already knows who is going to be saved? This refusal to evangelize was taught by some of Calvin's more foolish successors (and is still held by some today - often referred to as hypercalvinists). Obviously we cannot understand all of God's ways but the Bible is absolutely clear both that God chooses us in Christ, and that He commands His Church to preach the gospel to all. It may be a mystery but our task is plain.

The grace of God

What predestination and election are all about is God's grace. He chooses us though we are far from attractive to him. He loves us when we do not deserve it. He is faithful to us when we are unfaithful. He ensures our salvation by not only calling us but calling us effectively, with words of love and a gospel of power that we cannot refuse. He promises never to let us go when we come to Christ. He keeps us secure in Christ for all eternity.

As Paul put it in Romans 8: 30-39, 'Those He predestined, He also called; those He called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified. What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ... Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? ... [nothing] in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord'. Praise him for His electing grace!