

CALVINISM AND PREACHING

(2) Unconditional Election

Rev Ronald VanOverloop*

Why do some respond favourably to evangelistic efforts and others do not? And why do some reject every effort to win them to Christ. Why do some believe the preaching of the gospel and repent? And why do others remain in their sins and under the just condemnation of God?

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Often the answers to these questions centre in the person of the missionary or witness, or on the method used.

Reflecting Scripture, the Calvinistic Canons of Dordrecht answer these questions differently. "That some receive the gift of faith from God, and others do not receive it proceeds from God's eternal decree" (Canons 1:6). Some are saved because God, before the foundation of the world, merely of grace, and only according to His own sovereign good pleasure, has "chosen, from the whole human race, which had fallen through their own fault ... into sin and destruction, a certain number of persons to redemption in Christ" (Canons 1:7). The elect are by nature no more deserving than others, but God decreed to give them to Christ, to be saved by Him. Also God decreed to give to the elect faith through the preaching of the Gospel. This was for the demonstration of His mercy, and for the praise of His glorious grace. Therefore, the sole basis of this gracious election is the good pleasure of God, according to which He is pleased, not to select certain qualities and actions of men as a condition of salvation, but to adopt a definite number of specific persons as a peculiar people unto Himself (Canons 1:10).

That God is the One who determines who shall and who shall not be saved is one of the clearest teachings of Scripture. The ones who believe are "as many as were ordained to eternal life" (Acts 13:48). "God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation" (2 Thessalonians 2:13). "But the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded" (Romans 11:7b). "He [the God and

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Father of our Lord Jesus Christ] hath chosen us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved" (Ephesians 1:4-6). "For the children [Jacob and Esau] 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" (Romans 9:11). "Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth" (Romans 9:18). The elect are "predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will" (Ephesians 1:11).

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The Calvinistic answer, even though it accurately reflects Scripture, is the object of much criticism and even ridicule. "What is the use of preaching at all, if the number of the saved is unchangeably determined?" "How can one be zealous and beseeching in preaching if there is election, and especially if the election is unconditional?" "If God determined everything beforehand, including who will believe and who will not believe, then why do anything?" The critics believe that one cannot be effective in winning souls (Proverbs 11:30) if he holds to the doctrine of election. Therefore, some deny election altogether. Others acknowledge that the Bible teaches that God chose from before the foundation of the world. But in their mind this seems to deny man's responsibility. So they hold to an election which is conditional, an election according to which God chooses those whom He knew (foresaw) would believe.

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Calvinism has always maintained *unconditional* election. It is so very important to remember that man can do nothing to earn either salvation or election. It is equally important to remember that God could deny salvation to everyone, without doing an injustice to anyone. The reason for both is man's total depravity. No one may say, "It isn't fair," if God should not save. The reason is that all deserve hell. Is it unjust for a judge to sentence someone to what he deserves? Natural man deserves condemnation, for he has never done anything to remove his guilt or to atone for his sin. Natural

man has never done anything whereby he obliges God not to punish him as he deserves.

The Canons of Dordrecht, in Article 9 of the First Head of Doctrine, beautifully portray the teaching of Scripture concerning election. The sovereign and gracious purpose of God in the election of His people is the only source and sole basis of faith. Election is not and cannot be based on the fact that God foresaw some virtue or action of man, which virtue and action God had previously appointed as the necessary qualification for election. Foreseen faith, obedience of faith and holiness are not the cause or condition of election. Rather, those who are elected are chosen *to* faith and *to* the obedience of faith, holiness, etc. God has determined that those chosen "should be holy and without blame before him in love" (Ephesians 1:4). God saves "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 Timothy 1:9).

We answer the critics of unconditional election and of the preaching of election by saying that the church must preach. She is commanded to do so. And part of that which she must preach is the truth of election.

The church really needs only one reason for preaching, and that is that God has commanded her to "preach the word" (2 Timothy 4:2). Faithfulness to God demands obedience, not questions and objections. All we need to know is that God has ordained "by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21).

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Is it necessary to preach the doctrine of election and predestination, including reprobation? Is it legitimate to believe it, but not to preach it? Would it not be better to dwell on the love of God and on the responsibilities of man?

These questions are not recent ones. The authors of the Canons also faced these questions and the charges implied in them. In Article 14 they point out that the doctrine of election was preached by the prophets, by Christ Himself and by the apostles. They also note that the declaration of election was according to the most wise counsel of God. Additionally, the doctrine of election is clearly revealed in the Scriptures, both in the Old and New Testament. These spiritual fathers conclude that it is still to be published in its proper place. They caution that the truth of

election and predestination must be published with the spirit of discretion and piety, and without vainly attempting to pry into the secret ways of the Most High. Further, the Canons say that the declaration of these truths must be for the purpose of the glory of God's most holy Name and for the enlivening and comforting of God's people.

The preaching of election and reprobation puts God in His rightful place. Whether that preaching is in the established congregation or in the mission field, it gives the hearers the only proper view of God, namely, a high one. God must always be viewed as "high and lifted up" and as perfectly holy (Isaiah 6). The proper preaching of election establishes God's sovereign right to do whatsoever He is pleased, without being arbitrary or wishy-washy. The proclamation of election manifests the glory of God, for it exalts and magnifies God's always-effective grace in His undeserved favour toward His people in Jesus Christ.

The preaching of predestination also puts man in his proper place, namely, as undeserving of any good thing and worthy only of condemnation. Through his own fault man has fallen from his original state of righteousness, which makes every man "deserving of eternal death, so that God would have done no injustice by leaving them all to perish, and delivering them over to condemnation on account of sin" (Canons 1:1). Before the holy God man is to reply only as did Isaiah, "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts" (Isaiah 6:5). The preaching of predestination takes away all in which our flesh might glory, and leaves us only God. The apostle Paul concluded his presentation of predestination in Romans 9-11 with a doxology of praise to Him to whom is to be the glory for ever (Romans 11:33-36).

The preaching of election on the mission field and in the established congregation is to be with the same care that one preaches any other doctrine of Scripture. No single truth must be taken out of its place in the "whole counsel of God." The Scriptures set the boundaries for all preaching, including that of the truth of predestination. We are warned not to pry inquisitively into this truth, lest "men of perverse, impure and unstable minds wrest (distort) to their own destruction" (Canons 1:6). The preaching may not present predestination as a "mystery" which contradicts God's love. The preaching of election may not take the place of, or weaken, the earnest call of the gospel to the sinner to repent

and believe. The truth of election and reprobation does not give anyone the right to make judgments as to who is elect and who is reprobate. That is blasphemy. All the pastor and missionary must do is preach the whole counsel of God, resting in the fact that the Lord will use the means of the preaching to draw to Himself all He has chosen, and that God will use the means of the same preaching to be "justly terrible to those, who ... have wholly given themselves up to the cares of the world, and the pleasures of the flesh, so long as they are not seriously converted to God" (Canons 1:16) The twofold test for proper preaching of predestination is whether it glorifies God and whether it comforts the believing sinner.

The preaching of election is a source of "unspeakable consolation" (Canons 1:6) in the mission field as much as in the established congregation. The elect are taught they can gain the assurance of their "unchangeable election, not by inquisitively prying into the secret and deep things of God, but by observing in themselves ... the infallible fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God – such as a true faith in Christ, filial fear, a godly sorrow for sin, a hungering and thirsting after righteousness, etc" (Canons 1:12). This sense of election gives believers only more reason for humiliation before God, "for adoring the depth of his mercies, for cleansing themselves, and rendering grateful returns of ardent love to him, who first manifested so great love towards them" (Canons 1:13). The proper preaching of election warns against carnal security and against any laziness toward responsibilities. The preaching of predestination does not prevent anyone from coming to Christ. Further, those who wish a greater assurance of election must not be alarmed at the mention of reprobation but must persist in the use of the means which God has appointed for the working of this assurance and wait prayerfully for a season of richer grace.

The truth of election gives every preacher, whether pastor or missionary, the assurance that his efforts are not in vain. This assurance arises from believing that God has elected some and that it is His good pleasure to send others to hell in order to show "his wrath, and to make his power known" (Romans 9:22). We do not need to feel guilty if all do not respond favourably to the preaching. The assurance of the preacher that his efforts are not in vain arises from believing that the dispensing of salvation is in the hands of the Holy Spirit who calls, through the preaching, those whom God has predestinated. In God we cannot be defeated

in all our labours. Over against the total depravity and corruption of natural man is the truth of God's sovereign, irresistible and irreversible election of grace. The preaching of the truth of predestination frees the preacher from having to save. Faithfully preaching the whole counsel of God, the godly minister and missionary can rest in the Lord to save unto Himself those whom He has chosen.

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"May Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who, seated at the Father's right hand, gives gifts to men, sanctify us in the truth, bring to the truth those who err, shut the mouths of calumniators [false accusers] of sound doctrine, and endue the faithful minister of his Word with the spirit of wisdom and discretion, that all their discourses may tend to the glory of God, and the edification of those who hear them. Amen"

[Conclusion to the Canons of Dordrecht]

WHO WAS JOHN KNOX? *[Continued from page 7]*

transformed modern Papists. When their power to kill was taken from them, when they learnt to disclaim the Inquisition – to apologise, to evade – to fling the responsibility of their past atrocities on the temper of other times, on the intrigues of kings and statesmen, or on the errors of their own leaders, then indeed their creed could be allowed to subside into a place among the *religiones licitae* of the world. But the men who took from Popery its power to oppress alone made its presence again endurable; and only sentimental ignorance, or deliberate misrepresentation of the history of the sixteenth century can sustain the pretence that there was no true need of a harder and firmer hand."

A letter written by Knox to the faithful in England that love the coming of our Lord Jesus concludes: "I doubt not that we shall be comforted, when all such as now molest us, shall tremble and shake at the coming of our Lord Jesus: whose omnipotent Spirit preserve and keep you undefiled, body and soul, to the end. Amen. God increase our faith."