

THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE.

VI.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD.

CERTAIN doctrines of the Christian faith may be called Catholic because they are held by the whole Church of Christ throughout all her branches and amid all her controversies. They are so distinctly a part of Divine revelation and so inextricably woven into the experiences of the soul that to deny them were almost profane, and to ignore them is spiritual paralysis. Prominent in this class stands the Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice upon the Cross, from which doctrines the Church has departed at her peril, in which abiding she always triumphs. Any body of Christians which has denied the one or the other has gradually lost spiritual power, as when the sap returns to the trunk and the branches wither away; the history of the Christian Church bears witness alike to the vitalizing power of these doctrines and the death which befalls all who deny them. Certain doctrines, again, may be called provincial because they are held by some branches only of the one spiritual Church of Christ, and are overlooked or denied by others. No doubt they have their sanction in Holy Scripture, else they had never been accepted by saints and scholars, but their evidence is not so overwhelming as to compel general conviction. They have their vindication also in the experience of the soul, but they are not universal in their hold. An excellent illustration of this kind is the dogma of election, which has been more or less firmly held by the Puritan, and more or less distinctly denied by the Roman, pole of Christian thought, and which—sometimes for weal—the firm consolation of robust spirits, sometimes for woe—the bitter anxiety of those that were bowed down—has wielded an

irresistible influence on those who lived within the memory of this generation.

There is a fashion in doctrine, and it may be frankly admitted that the majestic conception of Divine sovereignty has fallen on evil days, because it has either become obsolete, or it has been turned into a reproach. Letters have always had their quarrel with this ancient faith from the days of the humanists, who saw its shadow cast over the careless gaiety of life in the period of the Renaissance; and in our time, notwithstanding the grim assistance of Carlyle, a Scot saturated with the Shorter Catechism, this doctrine has been unstrung and lost its grip in the pagan atmosphere of our strongest living poets and novelists. The rebirth of the Fatherhood of God in the theology of Maurice, and in the early books of George MacDonald, powerfully affected the religious mind, and alienated it from this doctrine as it had been stated in past centuries. This revolt found an ally also in the teaching of pious but unlearned evangelists, who, it may be said without uncharitable reflection, did not perhaps grasp this doctrine, and who certainly judged it expedient to let the Divine decrees severely alone, and, instead of explaining the Will of God, to make their direct and affectionate appeal to the souls of men. Without recantation or explanation, the Puritan pulpit has quietly allowed the doctrine to fall into the background, so that Mr. Spurgeon was the last preacher of the grand order to declare it without apology and to apply it to the upbuilding of faith, while a young modern would as soon think of discussing the identity of the Lost Ten Tribes as choosing election for the subject of a sermon. Persons of unblemished faith who would on no account deny or belittle what they regard as a truth of Holy Scripture, prefer that it should be kept in reserve, partly because it is one of the deep things of God which they do not hope to understand, partly because its treatment in the past has

not been always for the comfort of the soul. One does not exaggerate, therefore, in saying that election is a forgotten and an opprobrious doctrine.

What this doctrine was in the days of its royalty there is little doubt, for men were not afraid to declare it or to place its meaning upon permanent record. Of course there were differences in the accidents of the doctrine, but none in its essence. Some stalwarts of unflinching logic might hold that the purpose of election preceded creation in order of thought, so that men were virtually called into existence by the will of God in order to be saved or in order to be damned—which is surely the furthest reach of merciless reason within the range of human thought. Other divines of more fearful mind considered that the purpose of election followed the Fall in order of thought so that from among those who had merited death God of His good pleasure called some unto life, and in this way they were understood to conserve the goodness of God, which at any rate had saved a few out of a multitude, which otherwise would all have perished. It might be also debated whether the sacrifice of Christ had reference only to the elect or whether its overflowing benefits blessed the outer circle of the non-elect with uncovenanted mercies; whether the offer of the Divine mercy ought to be made only to the few who were already in the purposes of God or whether the preacher might not be justified in extending this offer to all his hearers. Upon those points of speculation there were keen arguments, which to-day would be an anachronism, but which only proved to us the insatiable love of our fathers for metaphysical reasoning. But on the main subject of the doctrine there was absolute agreement. For any one to teach that God, foreseeing those who should afterwards believe, elected them on that account unto salvation or that any one co-operated with the Divine Spirit in the work of salvation, was flagrant and unreasonable heresy. There

were points of distinction within the outer frontiers of the doctrine, but the doctrine in any case stood fast with sharp, clear-cut outlines that God of His own will, and for no reason in themselves, called some to life and left others to death, and that according to the decrees of God it would happen to them, do as they pleased, in this world and that which is to come.

As soon as this doctrine is stated one can understand how it came to excite such fierce antipathy and why it was placed more frequently than any other doctrine in the pillory of literature. It cannot be stated, however softened and disguised, without not only exposing itself to the criticism of reason, but also goading the moral sense into unflinching opposition. Not only has Calvinism laid itself open to satiric wit, which has ever played freely upon it, but it has also excited hot indignation because on the face of things this action of the Eternal seems to be so unfair, so arbitrary, so ungenerous—the policy not of a gracious sovereign but of an irresponsible despot. No earthly parent dare cast so many of the children whom he has begotten upon the streets to starve and to perish, and cherish so many in his home, showering upon them the riches of his goodness, while he might have done well by them all. Any parent who should give such an illustration of partiality and injustice would be called to account, not only by public opinion, but by the laws of his country, and he could not escape in any case without earning disgrace and punishment. Is it not reasonable to argue that what would be unbecoming an earthly father is utterly impossible with God, and what would be worthy of the father of our flesh will be surpassed beyond our imagination by the Father of our spirit?

Besides—and this is a very damning reflection on any doctrine—was not this belief in the irresponsibility and sovereignty of God calculated to have an injurious and

immoral effect alike upon those who were His beneficiaries and those who were His victims? Could anything be more certain to fill the human heart with pride and to make charity impossible than the conviction that God had chosen, say, a single people from among all the nations of the world, and had made with them a covenant of love, so that He became their God and they became His family, while the other nations of the world were left in darkness and in the shadow of death? The Hebrew prophets had to contend at every turn with the intense and bitter fanaticism of their nation, which made its boast in God and despised all other men; and, on the other hand, no doctrine more utterly destroyed hope in the breasts of those who were outside its range than the belief that for them God took no care, and for them He had no love. It mattered not how such outcasts prayed, nor what they did, they could never enter in by the door into the Father's house, and never could receive anything but unconsidered fragments of the Divine Goodness—thrown to them in the outer place as broken meat is cast unto the dogs. Was it not the case in our Lord's day that this sense of rejection and reprobation weighed heavily upon the minds of social pariahs and confirmed them in their sin and in their despair? It seemed, indeed, as if God were only a larger Pharisee sitting alone with fellow-Pharisees while they wandered on the high-ways uncared for and forsaken, and laid themselves down under the hedges to die unpitied and unregarded.

Before, however, any person refuses to consider this doctrine on the ground that it contradicts the necessary equality of all men before God he ought to ask whether there is any such equality to be found, and whether there is not rather a very manifest inequality. It is always easy to sit in one's arm-chair and to condemn this doctrine because it enshrines partiality, but it would be well to go out into life and discover the evidence of impartiality. As

a matter of fact the circumstances of life are no less perplexing than the idea of election, and this doctrine, like many another which is supposed to be unjust, may turn out to be in close contact with human life. It is unreasonable to blame theologians for insisting that God made distinctions, and to accuse them of a perverse imagination, when one has only to look outside to see that this very imagination is in action over the whole world. If it be indeed an axiom embedded in the best instincts of human nature that God makes no difference between one of his children and another, then this axiom is never argued in practical life, for the whole doctrine of election in its most pronounced form is an acting principle of history.

Is it not the case that one nation stood out from amongst all others as the chosen of the Almighty, and was endowed with singular privileges which other nations would have desired, and of which this nation was by no means worthy? With their ancient calling, their remarkable revelations, their unique order of prophets, their historical deliverances, their absolute isolation, their overflowing energy, their indomitable faith, the Jews have been, and remain unto this day, the unanswerable evidence of Divine election. What is true of Israel is equally true of England, which has been girt about by the sea and has received a clear knowledge of the Evangel, and has been distinctly succoured in straits of the national history, and has been endued with power unto the ends of the earth, and has received the gift of government of an undeniable kind, and all this, as any one can see, for great and righteous ends. Compare the light of the Jews with the gross darkness of the Gentiles, the civilization of England with the barbarism of an African people. Take the west end of a city, with its brightness, its culture, its luxury, and its pleasure; take the east end, crowded, squalid, hard-driven, agonized, and who is prepared to hold the scales of this contrast and to estimate its moral mean-

ing? And between two brothers of the same family what an inequality of ability, temper, appearance, physique! This variety of lot so extreme, so irresistible, so unmerited, is either the result of blind, inexorable law, or it is the effect of living, conscious will. We are either caught in the coils of material and social forces from which we cannot escape and which are practically omnipotent, or we are the subjects of intelligent and personal government; and behind all laws, and, if you please, behind clouds of darkness, God Himself is reigning.

And if Life, being summoned as a witness for the prosecution, unexpectedly affords evidence in the defence of sovereignty, neither is this archaic doctrine so utterly contradicted by the conclusions of modern theology. Without doubt one of the finest achievements in the range of dogma has been the rediscovery of the Divine Fatherhood, and no doubt this most living faith has been often used to impugn Divine sovereignty. It has seemed, indeed, to many minds a truism that if we believe in the Fatherhood of God, we must cease to believe in His sovereignty; and yet ought it not to be evidence, to a thoughtful person, that if one is discussing authority, that of a judge is nothing compared with that of a father. The judge is only able to try certain cases which are placed before him, and beyond the evidence of the case he cannot go. His power over the person at the bar is limited to the person's acts, and to those few acts that have been brought under his survey. Within the family the father takes to do not only with action but also with motives. He regulates at his pleasure the affairs of his household, and assigns to each his lot, with whom none may dispute, against whom none may rebel. He is not bound to give any reasons, nor does he refer to any statutes; indeed, for practical purposes, he acts as if he were omniscient and almighty. No sovereign of earth has power so absolute, none is so unfettered in his government, as a

father. The Fatherhood of God does not contradict His sovereignty, but it in reality rehabilitates and regenerates the idea, giving to it an even wider range, and investing it with a more tender character.

No doctrine which has at any time gripped the reason and inflamed the heart of any considerable body of Christian people can slip from the religious consciousness and be neglected in the teaching of truth without serious loss. Such doctrines do not die, they only sleep, and the resuscitation of this sublime conception would be very seasonable in our own time. It is not wonderful that the Roman Church has always regarded it with suspicion and has recognised in it a dangerous intellectual foe, for no idea has ever been such a certain safeguard against the priestly theory of salvation which would practically limit the covenanted mercy of God to a particular Church, and conveyance of grace to certain sacraments. If any one believes that the favour of God has rested in intention upon a man, not only before there was any church, but before he himself came into being, then it surely follows that that favour will not be frustrated and that man miss salvation because he does not happen to belong to a particular branch of Christ's Church, or because he has not been able to avail himself of the sacrament of the Body and Blood of our Lord. No accident of geography or of training will be allowed to bring to naught the sovereign grace of God, but that grace will rest upon the man unto salvation even although he never had the ministrations of an ordained priest and never had the benefit of a single sacrament. Nor is there any doctrine so likely to guard good but foolish men from religious extravagances and irreverent sensationalism as the profound conviction that they stand ever before His awful majesty, Who doeth as it seemeth good to Him in heaven above and on the earth beneath. Surely it would not be possible for preachers to present the message

of the Divine Love in such unworthy and offensive shapes if they had realized the austere grandeur of the doctrine of election.

If, however, this doctrine is once more to assert itself and to lay claim to something of its former dominion, it must appear in a new dress and be relieved of certain unfortunate additions. Men's minds must not again be driven to the verge of unreason by that futile and exasperating controversy about the relation of the will of God and the will of men. The logic of theology is strong, and, joining hands with material science, it may be able to prove that we have no freedom in life, but are quite helpless before irresistible forces—the mere plaything of necessity. But conscience has surely some value; and if we are sure of anything, it is that we can choose—can harden our hearts against the Divine Love or can open the same hearts to the Elect One of God as He knocketh in His Grace and in His Beauty. It is time also to declare without any hesitation that God does not will that any one should die, which is stark blasphemy; and that He does not withhold from any one the means of life, which were simply treachery; but that He on His part willeth all to live, and that He has done all in His power to accomplish this most worthy end. If any one be saved, as an ancient Father has it, unto God shall be all the praise: if any one perishes, on him alone shall be all the blame. He that liveth shall owe his life to the Grace of God, and he that dieth shall die in spite of the love of God the Father, and the virtue of the atoning sacrifice of the Son, and the patient and pleading grace of the Holy Ghost.

If it should still be urged that God has favoured one man above another, it ought to be pointed out that this action of God need not mean reprobation, but may only mean an order of salvation. It has been too lightly taken for granted that where God specially blessed a man in former days He

had done so to the detriment of all others, and that the end of the Divine blessing was exhausted in the man himself. Is it not far more credible, and was not this the teaching of the Hebrew prophets, that when God gave a man special privileges it was not that other men might suffer loss and he be tempted to boast, but rather that on him should be laid a deeper responsibility, and that through him other men might be saved. There are two ways of conveying the blessing of civilization to a strange country, and it is for the rulers to judge which will best serve their purposes. All the privileges of citizenship may be conferred upon the inhabitants of that country at once and without reserve, in which case it is to be feared that those privileges would be wasted, and might in the end turn into a curse; or certain of its inhabitants, of quick intelligence and susceptible disposition, might be selected and carefully trained that, after their education was completed and they had understood the principles of social order, they might be missionaries and teachers to their own country. After the same fashion the Eternal might have sent the Gospel of His grace on equal terms to all nations of the world at an early date of history, but surely in that case the Gospel had not been understood and would have been trampled under foot. His plan was rather to select a single nation with a genius for religion and through the centuries to train them in the knowledge of His character and in the consciousness of His goodwill, so that at an appointed time that nation might give to a whole world the good news of salvation. Had the Eternal chosen the Jews in order to condemn the Gentiles, then He had been a despot. When He chose the Jews in order to save the Gentiles, He was a Sovereign. Divine sovereignty is not a freak of despotism, but a principle of administration, which is a selection without reprobation, so that Abraham is chosen not that a world may be cast out, but that a world may be blessed in him. With a

perverted sense of Divine sovereignty the Jewish people were apt to insist that they were the favoured of God without regard to moral character or public service, and so they became insolent, but again and again their prophets declared that because they had been chosen they were on that account bound unto holiness; that if they departed from the Law of God, they of all nations would be most heavily punished; and also that if they had received immense benefits, they were holding the same in trust for the world. Whosoever, therefore, has any advantage in this world, either because he knows more or because he possesses more, is so far elect. He is therefore called upon first of all to bless God with fear and trembling, since the responsibility of his trust is so enormous, and next to serve his fellow-men with all faithfulness and with all his might.

Belief in Divine sovereignty bears several fruits which are not over-abundant in our day; for one thing, it creates a majestic view of God and this lies at the root of becoming and reverent religion. The unconscious irreverence of certain forms of religion in our day and the flabbiness of religious faith spring from inadequate conceptions of the power and righteousness of God. When one believes with the marrow of his bones that at the heart of the universe God reigns Almighty, All-Righteous, All-Wise, and All-Loving, then he has a worthy object of faith and a strong ground for prayer and a good hope of salvation. He is able to possess his soul in patience because he knows that above the fret and' turmoil of this present life God is doing His Will and accomplishing His purposes; and in his own straits and dangers he has in God a refuge and a hiding-place. The greatest reinforcements which religion could have in our time would be a return to the ancient belief in the sovereignty of God.

This belief, as it creates a majestic God, also makes strong men. One might conclude, if he knew not the fact, but

were only arguing by theory, that minds dominated by this doctrine would be weakened by superstition or cramped by fanaticism. It has, however, rather come to pass that the thinkers who have dared to make their way to the origin of things and to search into the mysteries of grace have been the most virile in the history of the Church. Whatever be his own opinions no one can deny that in the annals of philosophy there has been no acuter mind than Jonathan Edwards and none more influential in theology than John Calvin. And in the conduct of life this august doctrine has been the mother, not of hypocrites and slaves, as some would have us to believe, but of saints and heroes. If it tamed a man's spiritual pride and laid him helpless at the feet of God, it cast on him the awful responsibility of holiness and it sent him forth God's freeman. There was only one thing this man feared, and that was to sin; only one being before whom he trembled, and that was the Eternal. The Puritan feared God with all his soul, and this exhausted his capacity for fear. The face of man he did not fear. What was man, even though he be a king, compared with the King of kings? What mattered it what any man could do to him within whose soul God had spoken peace? Before the battles of the Civil War in England the Cavaliers of Prince Rupert drank and sang, being gay and gallant gentlemen. Before the same battles the Puritans spent the night in prayer and reading of Holy Scripture, being, as it was then considered, fools and fanatics. Pity the Cavaliers in their brave array when the Ironsides charged next morning with their battle cry, "The Sword of the Lord and Gideon." This iron and invincible faith has hated iniquity, broken tyranny, wrought righteousness, and achieved liberty. Witness its rolls of names, each one associated with the vindication of national freedom—John Knox, Oliver Cromwell, the founders of the Dutch Republic, and the fathers of New England. Hear the testimony of a

man not prejudiced in favour of Calvinism, or indeed of faith: "The Calvinists attracted to their ranks almost every man in Western Europe that hated a lie. They were crushed down, but they rose again. They had many faults; let him that is without sin cast a stone at them. They abhorred, as no body of men ever abhorred, all conscious mendacity, all impurity, all moral wrong of every kind, so far as they could recognise it. Whatever exists at this moment in England and Scotland of conscientiousness and fear of doing evil is the remnant of the convictions which were branded by the Calvinists into the people's heart."

And this faith has created a very tender religion in the case of its best children, whether Hebrew Prophets or Puritan saints. They who suppose that pious Calvinists have as a class been proud and hard, know not the men nor their writings. They have not read Archbishop Leighton or Samuel Rutherford, John Bunyan or Richard Baxter. If any man is saved by his own hand—his goodness, his works, or his faith—then is he lifted up to heaven, and none can bear him; but if one honestly believes that from first to last he owes all to the Grace of God in Jesus Christ, he is filled with humility. His is an awful conception of salvation, but the awfulness is shot through with a love which passeth knowledge. His election was not an act of arbitrary will, it was an act of personal grace. Before the world stood he was in the heart of God, and in the covenant of redemption; God gave Him into the charge of His Son. For him and such as him was this world created and the history of mankind arranged. Unto him do all the promises of the Word travel, for him were all the invitations of the Evangel written. Providence united with grace, that one day, as he went his own way, wilful and heedless, he might be arrested by a great light and see the Lord. For him the Lord was born and was rejected and suffered and died and rose again. When the

great High Priest offered his mediatorial prayer, this man's name was mentioned as it is now daily repeated before the Throne. When the nails were driven through the Saviour's hands, they pierced his name ; and when the spear touched the Saviour's heart, his name, being there first, was the cause thereof, and at this thought his heart also was broken to flow out for ever in love and holiness, in devotion and sacrifice, at the feet of Christ, in whom the election of God stands, and by Whom it must be for ever judged.

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