

Reformation
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If the Holy Spirit guides us at all, He will do it according to the Scriptures, and never contrary to them.

George Müller

Though organization is needed for its self-expression, the church is essentially not an organization but an organism, the Spirit-baptized body of Christ, the new-created humanity in which the risen life of Christ is realized through worship in the Spirit, and shown forth through “good works” and evangelism in the power of the Spirit.

J. I. Packer

To the men who wrote the New Testament, and to those for whom they wrote, the Spirit was not a doctrine but an experience. Their watchword was not, believe in the Holy Ghost, but receive ye the Holy Ghost.

James Denney

What Difference Does It Make?—II

Mark Webb

In the first part of this two-part series I began by showing the importance of doctrinal concern. I connected that importance to practical, pastoral concern by stating that the doctrines of grace, those truths which anchor the gospel in God’s sovereign grace, are most useful in living the Christian life. Often this point is missed in debates surrounding this matter. One gets the feeling that all of this is just grist for the theologian’s “debate mill.” We are attempting to show, in our two articles, that this is not the case. Rather, it will make immense practical difference in your life and mine when we confess that grace is totally sovereign in the purpose and application of redemption.

Who Can Come? The Doctrine of Effectual Grace

What is it, exactly, that saves the soul of a human being? You might think that I would reply that it is God’s election, or choice, of that person. Yet that’s simply not true. God in His election makes choice of individuals *to* salvation, and that choice will not be thwarted, but “election to salvation” and “salvation” are not the same thing. Otherwise a person would be saved at the moment God makes choice of them, before the foundation of the world. Yet it is clear from Scripture that the elect enter this world “by nature, objects of wrath” (Eph. 2:3), needing to be saved.

Others might say that it’s the death of Christ in a person’s stead which saves his soul. To be sure, without His death, no one would be saved. Yet Christ’s death for His people, which secures, purchases, and guarantees their salvation, does not immediately bring salvation upon His people. Else all those for whom He died would be saved at the moment His work on Calvary was finished 2,000 years ago. Yes, He bought their salvation—but *He bought it*, and it is *His!* The merit, the value, and the efficacy of what He did was not distributed immediately upon His death, but resides in His person.

The life Christ obtained for His people is never bestowed apart from Himself. A man will obtain this life only when he comes into a living union with Christ, who is life indeed. Whoever a man may be—elect or not—outside of Christ, he is outside of life (1 John 5:12), and “God’s wrath remains on him” (John 3:36). How, then, does a sinner receive this new life in Christ?

Election, as we have seen previously, is unconditional—but salvation is not! There are conditions which must be met if a man ever comes to salvation: He must come to life in Christ through repentance and faith. According to 2 Thessalonians 2:13, God not only has chosen individual sinners to an *end*—“salvation”—but He has also chosen the *means* to that end—“because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit.” Does it follow then, that if God has unconditionally chosen some to salvation, and has also ordained that salvation be obtained only through repentance and faith, that God must do something to ensure that those so chosen actually repent and believe? Perhaps such would not be necessary if elect men were falling all over themselves in a mad scramble to lay hold of life in Christ. But such is emphatically not the case, as we plainly see! The elect of God by nature are in a state of utter inability and rebellion toward God. Their salvation has been *ordained* by God the Father from before the foundation of the world. Their salvation has been *secured* and *purchased* by God the Son on Calvary’s cross. But for their salvation to be actually obtained and realized, a work of God the Holy Spirit must ensure that “irresistibly” brings them to repentance and faith in Christ. Of what use is this doctrine? It reminds us, first of all, where life is found—not in the work of man, neither in believing a doctrine, nor even in an eternal decree, but in the Lord of life! Consider 2 Timothy 2:10: “Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the

salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.” Paul is suffering the things he suffers because he knows that the elect, though chosen *to* salvation from the foundation of the world, must *obtain* that salvation which resides in Christ Jesus.

It is clear from Scripture that all men are promised eternal life if they will truly believe in Christ (John 3:16). All men *may* come in faith to Christ—they have permission—but who *will* come? Because all men share the same contempt for God and His Son, no man, on his own, will come to Christ. Listen to the plain teaching of our Lord:

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets: “They will all be taught by God.” Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from Him comes to Me (John 6:44-45).

It is said by our Lord that none “can” come to Christ except He “draws” them. Many believe this truth; at least to some extent they do. They believe that apart from the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, no one will come to Christ. But they also believe that this “conviction” may well be resisted and thwarted by man’s stubborn will and rebellious nature. This is not what the above passage is saying. The word is “draw,” not “woo.” Go to a well and see if you can “woo” a bucket of water to the surface. This is plainly speaking of something which effectually brings a sinner to faith in Christ. To say that it’s irresistible does not mean that the sinner does not resist God’s working. It simply means that the Spirit of God overcomes and conquers human resistance.

What is the nature of this “drawing”? Perhaps you have a mental picture of the hand of God laying hold of a lost sinner and dragging him, kicking and screaming, into the kingdom of Christ against his will. Get rid of this silly notion

once and for all. The next verse makes clear that sinners are drawn by being “taught.” God supernaturally opens the sinner’s blind eyes to see his great need of the Savior. Such a person is made willing, and freely chooses to come to Christ. In fact, he is made desperate for Christ and storms the gates of the kingdom. This is not an “attempt” on God’s part, or God “trying” to talk the person into something which he may or may not accept—for the passage states that “every” one of those so taught of God comes to Christ.

Why teach this doctrine? It reminds us once again that *all* of salvation is of grace. Knowing that those saved must believe and repent, I might be tempted to think that those things are my contribution to the work of salvation. But this doctrine makes it clear and plain: Yes, the sinner must meet certain conditions to be saved, but he will do so only as he is “given” the grace to do so (John 6:65).

Perhaps the most needed lesson we are taught by this doctrine is that there is something that goes on in salvation which only God can do. Because the things which men do in coming to salvation (e.g., repenting, believing, coming to Christ) are things which we can see with our physical eyes, and the working of the Holy Spirit in a man’s heart is something we cannot see, the tendency is always present to confuse the cause for the effect and the effect for the cause. Consider the Prodigal Son—he changed his mind about his father and his sin; he made a decision to go home; he actually arose and came home pleading mercy; and he actually found mercy from his father. We might be tempted to see these actions on the part of the son as the cause and reason of the mercy he receives. But his father was not confused about the cause and effect. For he declares, “for this son of mine was *dead* and is alive again; he was *lost* and is *found*” (Luke 15:24, emphasis mine). We don’t see anyone find the son in the account itself, as we do in the account of the shepherd who found his lost sheep, or the woman who

swept her house until she found her lost coin. But just because we don’t see it doesn’t mean that it didn’t occur. The Holy Spirit’s work is indeed like the wind—we see it and know it, not directly, but by its effects.

One result of the confusion which surrounds this truth has been the tendency to imply that salvation can be obtained by “imitating” the experience of others—i.e., do what they did, kneel where they knelt, pray what they prayed, and you too will be saved! Today we have thousands walking aisles, kneeling at “prayer altars,” and parroting the “sinner’s prayer.” They are told that because they’ve done these things they’re saved and never to doubt it. Yet Scripture declares you *must* be born again to see or enter the kingdom of heaven. Nothing in the universe “births” itself of its own will. Neither is the “new birth” of a sinner the production of man’s will, but the result of the will and power of God. Scripture is clear on this point. “Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (John 1:12-13). “He chose to give us birth through the Word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all He created” (James 1:18).

The bottom line of the matter is this: In salvation there is simply no substitute for God. He must work, He must draw, He must change, He must empower! With men these things are impossible. Yet with God, all things are possible!

Who Will Endure?

Our Lord declares that “he who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Matt. 24:13). Though some pull the teeth of this verse by casting it in a particular eschatological setting, the fact remains that what is here declared by our Lord is the consistent testimony of Scripture. In Hebrews we read that we belong to Christ’s household “if we hold on to our

courage and the hope of which we boast” (3:6). Later, we find this warning, “We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first” (v. 14).

Christian history provides ample testimony to the fact that every age has its share of those who once gave seemingly valid profession of faith in Christ, only later to fall away from that profession. In the scriptural record we have several notable cases, including Judas among the Twelve, Simon Magus among the Samaritan converts, and Demas among those who accompanied Paul. But in our day and culture this phenomenon has reached epidemic proportions. It is not uncommon to find that the vast majority of those “saved” in a modern evangelistic campaign will actually show little evidence whatsoever of a Christian walk within a year of their professed salvation experience. Such results have become the rule rather than the exception. How do we explain this phenomenon which occurs on such a wide scale and to such an unprecedented degree? How are we to view such “converts”?

The answer provided by many seems readily apparent. It is referred to as the “Carnal Christian Theory.” They claim that these are in fact real Christians—albeit “carnal Christians.” In this two-tiered approach to soteriology the claim is made that many converts remain in a lower, immature state, hardly differing in any respect from the lost, except that they’ve “invited” Jesus to come into their lives. Thus they may live out their days showing no evidence whatsoever of spiritual life, yet die and go to heaven on the basis of their prior decision for Christ. In all fairness, the proponents of this theory do exhort men on to a higher level of Christian living—i.e., to become “spiritual” Christians. Yet, as one friend of mine put it, you can not build a better bombshelter for carnality if you tried. False assurance is engendered by the notion that fruitfulness and obedience are strictly optional. Further, this theory allows the evange-

listic method employed to bear no responsibility at all for the quality of its converts. Should every single one of its converts be devoid of any sign of spiritual life, one dares not question it. After all, it did its job in bringing people to decision. Men and women were persuaded to “accept” Christ as their Savior. Such teaching emphasizes that the problem is one we shall always have: Christian growth, not life.

Another answer given to the question of who endures until the end is that offered by classical Arminianism. This view says, quite simply, that those who fall away were once saved but have subsequently lost their salvation. While this idea should be rejected because of its violation of several other clear texts of Scripture, it is, in some respects, a preferable and more scriptural view than that described above. In some respects it presents a higher view of what constitutes salvation. At least it does not suggest that salvation has no necessary consequence on a person’s outward life. Further, at least it tries to be consistent. It stands to reason that if a person can will himself *into* a state of grace, he ought to be able to will himself *out* of that state. If “free will” is the determining factor in the matter, then it must cut *both* ways.

Throughout these two articles I have sought to set forth the scriptural position that we are not saved by “free will,” but by “free grace.” Salvation comes by the sovereign disposition of God, not by the works or will of man. If it is not our works or our will that has placed us in this state of grace, then it stands to reason that it is not our works or our will that cause us to *fall out* of this state. If we are among those chosen by the Father, redeemed by the Son, and called by the Spirit unto this thing we call divine salvation, what could possibly arise to cause us to be lost? God would have to be either unwilling or unable to save His elect, and the Scriptures make it perfectly clear that neither of those is the case

(John 10:27-29; Rom. 11:29). The love of the Savior is not fickle—here today and gone tomorrow. Those He loves, He loves to “the full extent of His love” (John 13:1). Without question, there is no possibility that the elect of God shall ever be lost.

However, there is question as to whether you, or I, or any other person who has professed faith in Christ is, in fact, one of the elect. Are there no evidences whereby we can ascertain whether or not our profession is genuine and real as opposed to being false and spurious? Well, in fact, there are. We find that Christ’s sheep hear His voice and follow Him (John 10:27). Peter writes that we should make our “calling and election sure” by making certain that our knowledge of Christ is neither “barren not unfruitful” (2 Peter 1:3-11). James warns us to make certain that our faith is not “dead” faith—mere mental assent that does not produce works in the outward life consistent with our profession (James 2:14-26). New life in Christ produces evidence in the outward life—evidence which is not a “flash in the pan,” temporary, or fleeting thing. The evidence lasts because it reveals a new life in the heart—new life that is itself everlasting. Thus the elect will endure and persevere to the end, because the God who began the work in them will continue to perform it (Phil. 1:6). They “keep on” because they are “kept” by the mighty power of God Himself (1 Peter 1:5). They persevere because they are “kept by Jesus Christ” (Jude 1).

What are the ramifications of this doctrine? First, it allows us to give an answer to the condition of the person who seemingly once knew the Savior, but who today shows no evidence whatsoever of a genuine faith in Christ. Rather than asserting that he was actually saved but is not simply a carnal believer, or that he was saved and has now lost it, we can say with integrity and biblical balance that he at one time had the *appearance* of salvation but in time the appear-

ance proved to be false and spurious.

Consider the two houses, one of which is built on the sand and the other on a rock. Both look identical as to their external appearance. When the storms of life come they will both experience trials and testings equally, but one will fall and the other stand. Notice that the same storm revealed that one house had no foundation, while the storm revealed that the other had a solid foundation (Matt. 7:24-27). The one that did fall never lost its foundation, for it never had one. It appeared to have the same footing as the house built on the rock. Had we driven by these two houses and looked at them we would have assumed that they both had solid foundations. The trials that came proved otherwise. In like manner the seed which fell and sprouted up quickly in the shallow soil, withered away just as quickly when the hot sun scorched it and the strong wind blew upon it. It didn’t lose its root, for it never had a root system at all (Matt. 13:6). The foolish virgins who went out to meet the bridegroom, whose lamps went out when he appeared, didn’t lose their oil; they didn’t have any oil with them at all (Matt. 25:3).

Yet let me hasten to add that the best of the saints may, at times, be “carnal,” walking after the “flesh,” and in general living just like most men live. Therefore we must not be too hasty in making a judgment that a profession is spurious at the first sign of a carnality in a person’s life. For the moment, they may well be rebelling against God, balking against following Christ, striving against the Holy Spirit. However, the Christian, in the general direction of his life, is a person who “characteristically” follows his Lord. David committed both adultery and murder. Yet you wouldn’t say that David was “characteristically” an adulterer and a murderer. “Characteristically,” David was a man after God’s own heart, as Scripture tells us.

What about the assurance of salvation? Is it really possible that the saints must persevere to the end, to have any

degree of true assurance in this life? So what if today I show evidence of a saving knowledge of Christ? After all, how do I know that I will not turn out to be one of those who, like so many others, actually fall away?

This is the second, and perhaps most important, ramification of this doctrine. Not only is it possible for the saints to have assurance of their salvation, it is essential that they have at least some degree of assurance. Assurance is the essence of saving faith. We can hardly see Christ's work for sinners as a "saving" thing, and lay hold of Him as our hope, if such does not result in some measure of assurance. Further, without assurance that we are God's children, and are the recipients of His free grace and mercy, we cannot possibly live the Christian life as we ought. For both the duty to live as a Christian ought to live, and the motivation to perform that duty, presupposes the fact that I know myself to be the object of God's love, mercy, and grace. Evangelical "good works" can never flow out of the life of a person who is unsure of his standing with God—he will inevitably perform *in order* to be accepted by God, rather than *because he is accepted*. But back to our dilemma: How can I have such assurance, since I know that the elect must endure to the end, and I, if I know myself at all, know myself to be so very weak?

The answer is not that complex. The elect have assurance, not because they are sure themselves, but because they are sure of God. They rest not in their ability to persevere, but in God's ability to preserve. Whether they are able to keep standing, they know not; but they are confident in God's ability to keep them from falling! Whether they have the power to hold on to God to the end, they know not; but they are confident in God's power to hold on to them, knowing that none are able to pluck them out of His hand! Thus, come what may, they're confident of overcoming—not because they rest in the power of God. Their eyes

are fixed upon a Savior—a Savior who is able to keep that which they have committed unto Him against that day.

Conclusion

Soon after the Lord opened my eyes to see the truthfulness of what we call the "doctrines of grace" I had an interesting encounter with a young lady. I was pastor of a small Southern Baptist church in Wyoming and this lady was serving in our state that year as a summer missionary. Towards the end of the summer she came over to our church to help with our vacation Bible school. The first evening she was in town, while eating dinner with us, she made the comment, "I've heard about you!" "Oh," I replied, "how so?" She went on to say, "I've heard about your 'election' stuff!"

It was then that I began to understand what Paul meant, in describing the life of one who serves Christ, when he said, "*as known, yet regarded as unknown*" (2 Cor. 6:9, emphasis mine). For the next thirty minutes or so, as best I could, I explained to her what I believed and why. I wasn't argumentative or antagonistic—which I confess was unusual for me in those days—I just laid out the scriptural reasons for my faith. She listened politely, and when dinner was over, she left to spend the night with another family in our church down the street. I didn't think too much more about it.

The next morning the young lady came down for breakfast and it was evident that she was quite upset. When quizzed by her host about what was the matter, she responded, "If what he says is true, then I'm lost!" Later that same morning, she came into contact with another lady in our church—one who was absolutely hostile to the doctrines of grace—and confessed her misery. The second lady loaded her into her car, drove her fifty miles to the nearest Baptist minister who spent several hours assuring this young lady that all was well with her soul and that I was "all

wet” in my teaching. By the time I even knew what had transpired, the young lady had gotten over her fears and, so far as I know, never had another qualm about the matter.

In analyzing this situation, I remember at the time being quite puzzled by her reaction. What was it that had so shaken her assurance of salvation? When my eyes were opened to see the doctrine of unconditional election, I was filled with adoration and wonder. It was as if suddenly the answers to so many of the questions that had plagued me—not the least of which was “Why me?”—were staring right at me. Suddenly I understood just what had happened to me many years earlier when I came to know the Lord. What a blessing, what a joy, and what a comfort this doctrine was. Yet the same doctrine that had answered my questions, raised questions for this young lady. The same doctrine which I saw as such a joy and comfort, she saw as a threat. What was going on? Why wouldn’t the saints of God be delighted to learn that their Savior came into this world specifically to save them? Why wouldn’t the knowledge that God chose them in Christ before the foundation of the world, purely according to His own mercy and grace, be a source of constant joy and blessing?

That was my first experience with a reaction that I’ve seen scores of times since. In time I think I have come to a better understanding of why people respond to these doctrines as they do. I think the answer is this: These teachings threaten the very righteousness they are trusting for their salvation. If you think you are saved because you decided, you chose, you walked an aisle, etc., and if you are resting the hope of your soul upon your decisions, your choice, and your action, then these doctrines will be deadly to such a hope. Either you will have to turn away from your false hopes, admitting your lost condition, and casting yourself upon the Lord alone for mercy, or you must attack the doctrines (and usually the one proclaiming them) that are

robbing you of the very ground of your hope before God.

Face it: Most people do not believe that there is even the remotest chance that they will go to hell, however much they joke about it and make light of its existence. Ninety-nine out of hundred (an understatement if there ever was one) people don’t lie awake at night in agony of soul fearing the God who can cast both body and soul into hell. And they have been given a reason why they are sure such a thing will not happen to them, no matter how false and faulty is the reason they have been given. One may have a *moral* reason: He says: “I am not such a bad fellow, I have been a good husband and father, and I pay my taxes.” A rancher in Wyoming once tell me, “I’ve never been arrested.” That is an amazing piece of fallen deduction isn’t it? Another may have a *religious* reason: “I’ve been baptized, I go to church, I pray and read my Bible, and in general I do what my religion requires of me.” Make no mistake about it, people have reasons. And they trust in their reasons—they have “faith”—they have banked the hope of their soul’s eternal well-being upon their reasons. It is not that they have no faith at all; it is rather that their faith rests upon the wrong foundation.

These doctrines confront such a person with a very simple question: Is the reason that you believe you’re going to miss hell and make heaven based on something you have done, or something God has done? Is your hope based upon something that you’ve done for Him, or upon a work of grace that He has done for you? Which is it in your case? Can you truly say, “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness”? All other ground, as the hymn writer plainly says, “is sinking sand.” It will not support you in the day of judgment. If your hope is faulty, why not turn from it right now and flee to Christ? There He sits in the heavens, at His Father’s right hand, with all power in heaven and earth in His hands—power to save and power to damn. He is the mighty judge, holding the destinies of all men in His

hand—but He is a mighty Savior, able and willing to save sinners, who disavow all other hopes and flee to Him alone for refuge from the wrath to come. What is to prevent you from casting yourself upon His mercy? Are you too sinful? He came to save sinners and promises to receive those who come to Him. Are you too filthy and vile to appear before Him? He grants to all who come naked to Him for dress the spotless robe of His own righteousness. Do you have nothing with which to purchase this blessing? To those who come to Him with an empty, outstretched hand, trusting only in His promises and His work performed for sinners at the cross, He grants life and blessing as a free gift.

Now what prevents you from coming? Election? Predestination? Hardly! The Scriptures reveal that you will receive no sympathy in the day of judgment by pleading “election” as the reason for not coming to Christ. God’s eternal decrees do not bar you from coming to Christ. If you will not come it is not an “election” problem, but rather it is a heart problem. Your old prideful will keeps you from abandoning yourself to Him alone. You think like so many who reason, “If I cannot stand in heaven and sing, ‘I did it my way,’ then I would rather not go at all!” But the song of the redeemed in heaven is not “Worthy am I,” but “Worthy is the Lamb!” No other song is known, desired, or allowed there. Why not turn from your false hopes even now, humble yourself and bow. Humble yourself and admit your need. Turn to Christ alone to save you. No matter how self-abasing this might be, look to Christ!

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