

No. 109.

WHAT PRESBYTERIANS BELIEVE.

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WHAT PRESBYTERIANS BELIEVE.

It is well known that Presbyterians have long been charged with holding opinions grossly absurd and impious, and destructive of all true piety. In particular they are accused of maintaining a system of fatalism which sets aside man's free agency and moral accountability. They are represented as teaching that one part of mankind will be saved, do what they may, and another part damned, do what they will; that God is the author of moral evil; that he compels his creatures to sin by his decree, and consigns even the tender infant to eternal flames. In short, they are accused of making the God of heaven worse than the prince of hell.

It should, however, be considered that they are interested opponents who bring these heavy charges. Presbyterians themselves have uniformly protested against them as false and slanderous. That there has been much misrepresentation in the case, seems probable for several reasons:

1 It is not pretended that Presbyterians are less pure in their morals than other professing Christians; so far from that that the complaint is usually of an opposite kind, namely, that they are over-strict—a strong proof that their doctrine was not the evil tendency alleged.

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2. Presbyterians are not behind others in earnest prayer, and the use of scriptural means for the conversion of their fellow-men, whether at home or abroad. Indeed, they are known to be among the foremost in all the great moral enterprises of the day. This will hardly agree with the supposition that they have adopted a system of fatality.

3. At different periods there have been multitudes of persons, of distinguished piety, embracing substantially the same doctrinal system as do the modern Presbyterians. Many of them were lights of the age in which they lived, and left the impress of their learning and genius upon whole generations. Among them are included all the great instruments employed by divine Providence in accomplishing the glorious Reformation of the sixteenth century. That such men embraced a system fraught with impious absurdity, is not easy to be believed.

4. The warm opponents of the Presbyterian doctrine, are accustomed to invite its avowed friends and advocates to unite with them in the communion of the body and blood of Christ—an act more strongly expressive of Christian fellowship than any other on earth. The cordiality with which the invitation is usually made, shows that even in the judgment of decided opponents, Presbyterians are not guilty of the shocking blasphemies laid to their charge.

What, then, do the Presbyterians believe? This question we shall now attempt to answer with all frankness; and, therefore, our reference will be to those who receive the Presbyterian Confession in its plain and obvious meaning.

I. The Scriptures often make mention of a people as “given to Christ,” as “chosen in him before the foundation of the world,” and as “predestinated unto the adoption of children.” These, and many similar declarations, we regard as intended to teach one of the most cheering doctrines of the Bible, viz :

THE ELECTION OF GRACE, OR GRATUITOUS ELECTION.

To understand this doctrine, let us go back, in thought, to a period in the unsuccessive ages of a past eternity when there were no heavens and no earth, no angels and no men; when Jehovah dwelt alone. All the vast future, with its countless myriads of beings and events, stood present to his view as dependent for existence upon his sovereign pleasure. It was ordained that man should exist—that he should be formed in the image of his Maker, able to stand, but liable to fall. It was determined, for the best possible reasons, that he should be permitted or suffered to fall.* It was foreseen, as the consequence, that the whole race would be involved in guilt and ruin. Justly might their Creator leave them all a prey to the vengeance they would provoke. This would be the fearful doom of the apostate angels for whom no Saviour would be provided. But toward fallen man, his thoughts were of mercy. He would not suffer the whole race to perish. He resolved to save some of them from sin and endless woe. For this end he would send his Son Jesus Christ, through whose atoning death, mercy might be offered to the guilty. All should be invited to approach the Saviour for pardon and acceptance. And as, through deep depravity, they would prove unable of themselves to come, his grace should enable all that were truly willing. But he foresaw that unless some further measure were resorted to, none would be really willing. All would be so wedded to their sins—so averse to the holiness of the gospel, that not one would come to Christ for eternal life. Not the most solemn appeals to the conscience—not the most touching representations of a Redeemer's dying love—not the most thrilling description of the hor-

* "This their sin, God was pleased, according to his wise and holy counsel, to permit."—Presb. Conf., Chap. vi., § 1.

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rors of the finally impenitent, could ever prevail on a depraved sinner to forsake his sins and flee to the Saviour.

What, then, was to be done? Should the great Jehovah allow his glorious scheme of mercy to be defeated by the wickedness of man? Must he suffer the whole world to reject his grace and die? And must all the tears, and agonies, and blood of his dear Son be expended in vain? Blessed be God, he determined otherwise. He resolved that a portion of mankind, a multitude which no man can number, should be made willing to accept his offered grace. For this end he would send forth his divine Spirit to enlighten their darkened minds, to renew their stubborn wills, and effectually draw them to the Saviour. In connection with this gracious purpose, he ordained the means which, through the Spirit's influence, should secure their conversion, their continuance in holiness, and their eternal happiness. And this determination of the Father, to make a people willing to come to Christ, including in it the means to secure the end, is what we style the *election of grace*. It was truly a purpose of *grace*, because its objects were not chosen on account of any goodness foreseen in them. On the contrary, God beheld them as sinners, who but for the interposition of electing love, would never be anything but sinners. He chose them to salvation as the end, and to faith and holiness as the means, and thus their election originated from his own spontaneous mercy.

What precise proportion of the human family is comprised in this gracious determination of God, he has not seen fit to reveal. But in view of the salvation of those who die in infancy, and considering the future day of unmingled prosperity promised to the church, we may safely presume that by far the greater part of the descendants of Adam, will at last be found among the elect of God. But though the number is uncertain and indefinite to us, and may be far above or far below our calculations, with God

it is so "certain" and "definite" that he will not be disappointed in regard to one whom he expected or intended to save.

Such is the election of grace as it is held in our branch of the Church, and we may see that it perfectly *harmonizes with the free unlimited offer of salvation*. All are bidden to the gospel feast, because it is the duty of all to come,—because all are alike needy—because there is enough for all, and because all are to be left without excuse. When all refuse the invitation, God interposes to save a "remnant according to the election of grace."

Nor is there any force in the objection, "that if a man is elected, he will be saved, do what he may." For we have seen that the elect are chosen to be saved, not from the *punishment* of sin merely, but from sin itself. They are chosen to be holy. The objection, then, amounts to this: that if a man is to be saved from sin, he will be saved, whether he be saved from sin or not!

Equally vain is the objection "that if men are not elected, they cannot be saved, do what they will." Let them come to Christ, and they have his word for it that he will not cast them out. And what hinders their coming? No secret decree, no mysterious necessity, nothing but their own voluntary blindness and love of sin. They would be enabled to come if they were truly willing. But they stay away of their own free choice, and are thus the voluntary procurers of their own destruction. Predestination is not the cause of their ruin; but their wilful unbelief, with their other sins, foreseen by their Maker, is the real cause of their predestination to death eternal.

Nor does this doctrine take away the necessity of *earnest endeavours in the use of the means* to secure salvation. Those who urge this objection, lose sight of a grand principle lying at the very foundation of the Presbyterian system, namely, *that God has ordained the end and the means*

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in connection with each other. He has not, as the objection implies, decreed the end to be attained without means; nor has he appointed the means but in conjunction with the end. These two are inseparably joined, and therefore we are furnished with the strongest motives to seek the Lord in the time of our merciful visitation.

Equally pointless is the objection that our doctrine represents God as *partial*. That he is *discriminating* in his goodness—that he bestows more upon some than upon others, is what no one can deny. He passed by apostate angels, and extended mercy to fallen man. He leaves one nation in the darkness of heathenism, and sends the light of salvation to others. He takes one to heaven in infancy, and leaves another to grow up and die in sin. In these and similar instances, it is admitted by all, that he is not chargeable with partiality, since he has good and sufficient reasons for his conduct. Why, then, should he be liable to this charge, if for equally good reasons, best known to himself, he resolves to convert one sinner, and leave another unconverted?

We shall now call attention to a few considerations in favour of this doctrine.

I. If there had been no election of grace, there could have been no certainty of the salvation of any part of mankind. For if God had no fixed determination to draw reluctant hearts to the Saviour, it could not be certain that any would ever come. Thus the scheme of redemption, the master-piece of creative wisdom and power, might prove an utter failure! The Sovereign of the universe would have to wait in anxious suspense about the result of his operations, till creatures made out of dust—creatures who had cast off their allegiance to their Maker, should first determine how they would act! The eternal Son of God, after all his untold agonies, must leave it to chance or apostate men to decide the mightiest question that ever

occupied celestial bosoms—the question whether he should ever see of the travail of his soul, or whether all his labours and sufferings should be endured in vain.

2. But this is not all; for a denial of this doctrine *takes away our encouragement to prayer*. If God has ordained the conversion of sinners in connection with the prayers of his people, the means and the end being joined together in his decree, then indeed the supplications of the righteous will not be in vain. On the other hand, if God has no fixed determination to save any one; or if the salvation of sinners is left dependent on the self-determinations of their own hearts; or if God cannot make men willing to come to Christ, we can have no assurance that our prayers will be of any avail.

3. If election be not true, ministers have little or *no encouragement to preach*. They cannot bend the stubborn wills, or soften the hard hearts of sinners. And if there be no fixed purpose of God, securing the conversion of men in connection with the preaching of the word,—if the success of ministers depend on chance, or the uncertain determinations of the human will, there can be little ground to hope that their labours will not be in vain in the Lord.

4. A denial of this doctrine *overthrows salvation by free grace*. For if, as alleged by the opponents of the doctrine, God elected certain persons rather than others on account of some good thing he foresaw in them, then their election and consequent salvation turned upon their own superior moral excellence, and did not spring from the free unmerited mercy of God. They made themselves “to differ” from others, and may consequently claim a large share of the glory of their salvation.

5. The election of grace is, we think, amply supported by the Scriptures. The reader is requested to weigh the following out of many passages that might be adduced :

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Rom. xi. 5. "Even so then, at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace."

Eph. i. 4. "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy."

1 Pet. i. 2. "Elect, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the spirit unto obedience, and sprinkling of the blood of Christ." Here notice that these persons were elected, not *on account of* foreseen obedience, but *unto* obedience; not *because of* their sanctification, but *through* sanctification, as the means to secure the end.

2 Thess. ii. 13. "God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation, through sanctification of the spirit and belief of the truth."

Rom. viii. 30. "Whom he did predestinate, them he also called; and whom he called, them he also justified; and whom he justified, them he also glorified."

Eph. i. 5. "Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children, by Jesus Christ unto himself, according to the good pleasure of his will."

Acts xiii. 48. "As many as were ordained to eternal life, believed."

Rom. ix. 16. "So, then, it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy."

II. Closely allied to the election of grace, is the doctrine of

THE CERTAIN PERSEVERANCE OF CHRISTIANS IN HOLINESS.

The one grows out of the other, and must stand or fall with it. For if believers were chosen of God before the foundation of the world to be holy, and to continue such in order to their final salvation, it follows, that should a single one of them cease to be holy, a settled purpose of God would, in that instance, be defeated. And if this may

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happen in one instance, it may in ten thousand, and in ten thousand times ten thousand. Can we believe this of an all-perfect Being? Men may apostatize from a profession of the gospel, but the true disciple of Christ will be "kept by the power of God, through faith unto salvation."—1 Pet. i. 5.

III. A DEFINITE, VICARIOUS ATONEMENT

Is another article of our creed. That Christ died in the room and stead of sinners, thus satisfying the demands of law and justice, is abundantly proved by the Scriptures. He "bore our sins," and was "made a curse for us, to redeem us from the curse of the law."

It is not, however, any part of our doctrine, that the sufferings of Christ were of *limited value or sufficiency*. Presbyterians have been wrongfully accused of teaching "that Christ suffered just so much as was necessary to save the elect; and if there had been a design to save any more, he must have suffered proportionably more." There is not the least foundation for the statement. We have no good reason to suppose that Christ's sufferings would have been greater, had he designed to save any conceivable number of sinners. For his infinite dignity imparted to his sacrifice a value truly infinite, rendering it as sufficient for all, as it is adapted to all; and on this ground its benefits are offered to all. If any perish, it is not because of any deficiency in the atonement. "They never truly come to Christ, and therefore cannot be saved."—*Presb. Conf. of Faith*, chap. x. sec. 4.

It has been said that, on this subject, the point of difference between us and others is, whether Christ died for all? But this is not a fair statement. We do, indeed

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deny that Christ *died for all*, in the sense in which that expression is understood by Arminians; but our Church has always maintained that in respect of the sufficiency and applicability of the Saviour's sufferings, he may be said to have died for the whole world. The real ground of controversy among those who agree as to the nature of the atonement is, What is its ultimate design? Had the Lord Jesus no definite purpose to save any one? or did he suffer with the intention of saving all men?

We cannot think that Christ had no definite purpose in regard to the objects of his interposition. The Scriptures represent him as coming into the world with a positive intention *to save* sinners, not merely to render their salvation possible. Nor can we imagine that an all-wise Being would enter upon a work of such unexampled labour and suffering without a precise object to be attained. On the other hand, if we say that Christ intended to save all men, at once the question will arise, Why, then, are not all saved? It will not do to answer by saying, that the divine purpose has been defeated by the unbelief of man. For if God cannot hinder man's unbelief, the prayers of Christians, and the labours of ministers, are alike useless. If God cannot make sinners willing to come to Christ, who can?

Presbyterians, therefore, deem it safest to conclude that the atonement accomplishes the design of its author, and saves all whom God intended it to save. And this doctrine, so far from being adapted to perplex inquiring sinners, has a most encouraging tendency; for if they are willing to be saved on the terms of the gospel, there must, of necessity, be a divine intention to save them—these two things being connected together in God's decree. But if they stay away from Christ till they first ascertain what he intends to do with them, they will never come at all.

IV On the subject of

MAN'S INABILITY,

all evangelical Christians agree, that no one can possess faith, repentance, or true holiness, without the grace of God. But there are those who assert that all men already possess this grace in a degree sufficient for their salvation. We contend, on the contrary, that men, while in an unconverted state, possess no available ability in spiritual things; and that, in order to comply with the terms of salvation, they must first obtain grace from him who "gives the Holy Spirit to them that ask him." We believe that even the best of men, so far from having sufficient moral ability, deeply feel their need of daily supplies from the fountain, and that

"Whoever says, 'I want no more,'
Confesses he has none."

Accordingly, we find sincere and humble Christians of every denomination confessing their weakness at a throne of grace, and imploring the aid of an almighty Friend, in their time of need.

We cannot adopt the sentiment that "man's ability is the measure of his duty," as we are confident that in many instances, men are accountable to God for what they cannot do themselves. For example, God commands us, saying, "Make you a new heart and a new spirit."—Ezek. xviii. 31. Yet he claims this work as that which he alone can perform. "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you."—Ezek. xxxvi. 26. And hence, the Psalmist, confessing his own helplessness, cries out, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." And this is only an instance out

of many, in which God justly requires us to have what we can obtain only from himself in answer to prayer. It should be considered that man's inability arises from his love of sin and dislike of holiness. To say, therefore, that his inability releases him from obligation, is to say that wickedness is its own excuse, and that the greater the sinner, the less is his guilt.

We must here correct the groundless assertion that Presbyterians represent sinners as bound, hand and foot, so that they cannot come to Christ, however much they may desire to do so. This is clearly a misstatement; for agreeably to our doctrine, sinners will be enabled to come to the Saviour, if they are truly willing. He that worketh in them *to will*, will not withhold the ability *to do*. Philip. ii. 13.

V. In regard to

INFANTS,

Presbyterians are of opinion that those dying in infancy are *elect* unto salvation. As they are involved in the guilt and misery of the fall, they are appropriate subjects of the divine mercy; and their election secures to them an application of atoning blood, and the renewing influences of the Spirit. Thus, when the Lord Jesus shall "gather his elect from the four winds," infants will not be left behind.

Our doctrinal opponents dislike this view of the subject, because, if all who die in infancy are elect, then, as they could not have been elected on account of foreseen faith and works, it will follow that fully a third part of our species are saved by *unconditional election*.

When we speak of infants dying in infancy as *elect*, we mean that they are chosen out of the whole mass of human beings. Our use of the term, therefore, does not imply that any who die at that tender age are not elected. So when John, addressing the "elect lady," speaks of her

"elect sister" (2 John 13), we do not infer that she had *non-elect* sisters. In the exercise of his electing love, God had before him the whole race of mankind, not a particular class, age, or sex. And in the opinion of Presbyterians all who die in infancy were included in his purpose of mercy, and selected, along with others, out of the whole family of Adam.

We will add that all charitable, well-disposed persons, must witness with pain the frequent attempts to injure our branch of the Church, by circulating reports against its ministers of preaching the doctrine of "infant damnation." While we pity and pray for the authors of these unfounded calumnies, that they may possess a better spirit, we desire to repeat the declaration, often heretofore made in the face of the world, that neither the Presbyterian Church, nor any of its regular ministers, have at any time taught that obnoxious sentiment.

VI. Our church receives the doctrine of

DIVINE APPOINTMENT,

which may be stated thus:—God, according to a wise and benevolent plan, always existing in his mind, disposes of all events for his own glory, and the supreme good of the universe; so that, in effect, nothing comes to pass without his agency, influence, or intentional permission.

The opponents of this doctrine have taken occasion from it to hold up Presbyterians as making God the author of sin, and as denying man's free agency. In support of these heavy charges, they quote a detached part of a sentence found in our Confession of Faith which says that "God ordained whatsoever comes to pass." But they usually omit the words which immediately follow, viz., "Yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or

contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established."—Chap. iii., sec. 1. Here is solemnly affirmed as an essential part of our doctrine, that God has so ordained all events as neither to become the author of sin, nor to interfere with the free agency of man. Indeed, it is a prime principle with Presbyterians, that all the good in the universe proceeds from God; and all the evil from creatures, who act from their own free choice, uninfluenced by any compulsory decree.

We believe that the purposes of God do extend to all events, but not that they extend to all in the same manner. Some things God has purposed to bring to pass by his own agency, and other things, as sinful acts, he has purposed to permit, or suffer to be done by others. And the things which he does by his own agency, and those which he suffers to be done by others, include all that ever come to pass. We may add that this distinction between determinations *to do* on the part of God, and determinations *to suffer* sinful acts to be done by others, not only exists in our Confession, but has been taught by all Presbyterian divines from the earliest period.

The doctrine of divine appointment is strongly supported by the following Scriptures:

Isa. xlvi 9, 10. "Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things which are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure."

Ps. cxv. 3. "Our God is in the heavens; he hath done whatsoever he pleased."

Job xxiii. 13. "He is in one mind and who can turn him? and whatsoever his soul desireth even that he doeth."

Eph. i. 11. "Who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will."*

* The reader is requested also to examine the following texts: Dan. iv. 34, 35; Isa. x. 5, 6, and 12-15; Gen. xlv, 5, 6, 7, and 8, and 1. 20; Acts ii. 23, and iv. 27, 28.

In the next place, a denial of this doctrine appears to lead to the gloomy notion of *fate*. If God has not the control of all events—if he has not brought about all the good he intended—or if any evil has come to pass which he could not prevent, or did not design to permit, he has been hindered from doing his whole pleasure. And if so, by whom? Not by creatures whom he made out of nothing, but by some mysterious power superior to himself—some dire unconquerable necessity to which he was forced to submit! And this is exactly the ancient heathen notion of *fate*—a blind but irresistible power, to which even the gods were subject.

Destroy this doctrine of divine appointment, and the Christian is deprived of his chief source of *consolation under afflictions*. For if the events of our lives are ordered by creatures or chance, we cannot expect them to work together for our good; nor can we view in them the chastening hand of a Father. On the other hand, nothing is more consoling than to regard every single event as a part of a wise and perfect plan; and to know that however our schemes are frustrated, the purposes of Jehovah shall abide to a thousand generations.

Once more: the denial of this doctrine takes away the only true ground of *submission under the trials of life*. In so far as we regard the agency of man in the evils that befall us, our resentment is prone to rise, and if we could look no further, there would be no apparent grounds for submission. But if we can refer everything to the appointment of our Heavenly Father, we can readily acquiesce in the wisdom and equity of his dispensations. David, when assailed by the curses of Shimei, repressed his indignation by turning his thoughts to the Supreme Disposer of events, saying, "Let him alone, and let him curse, for the Lord hath bidden him."

It would be equally easy to show that a denial of this

doctrine deprives us of our chief encouragement to prayer, and the use of other means for the attainment of temporal or spiritual good; but we waive further argument.

We have now given a brief account of the leading peculiarities of our doctrinal scheme. Our statements are indeed widely different from those made by interested opponents, who, selecting detached passages from our Confession, wrest them from their true meaning, and deduce from them the grossest absurdities. In this way it would be easy to make the Bible itself speak the language of impiety. In judging of any system of doctrines, it is but fair to view the whole in connection, and explain one part by another.

It has been alleged that there are many difficulties in our system; but we believe it contains fewer than any other. Many leading Arminians, for instance, to escape what they call *Calvinistic error*, are constrained to deny or limit the foreknowledge of their Maker. Nor is this at all wonderful, considering the difficulties which an admission of that divine attribute creates in their system. Suppose an Arminian to admit that God knows exactly the persons who will be finally lost. We will then ask him, Of what use is it for persons of that description to seek salvation, and what good can the prayers of others do them? Can all the men on earth alter the final doom of one whose damnation is infallibly foreknown to God? Now here is one out of many difficulties unanswerable on the Arminian hypothesis, but which are readily obviated by principles belonging to our system. Thus, we say, the foreknowledge of God is founded upon his decrees; and his decrees so connect together the means and the end, that no one who truly seeks salvation can be finally lost.

May the reader of these pages be led by the Spirit of grace to know and love the truth as it is in Jesus, and experience its saving power upon his heart!

DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY.

God may dispose of us as he thinks fit, and is not accountable to us. All nations are in his hand but as clay in the hands of the potter. Woe, then, to the man that strives with him. So did Israel come to ruin. All who will not be monuments of his mercy shall be of his justice. The great Creator and Lord of the universe has an undoubted right and uncontrollable power to dispose of us and all creatures as he pleases. This extends equally to our temporal and eternal concerns; and, as fallen creatures, we are entirely without plea or claim, having forfeited everything by sin. The Lord may, therefore, according to the counsel of his own will, either leave us to ourselves, as "vessels of wrath fitted for destruction," or cast us into a new shape, as "vessels of mercy prepared before for his eternal glory." But this absolute sovereignty is always directed by unerring wisdom, and exercised with the most perfect justice, truth, goodness, and mercy; so that none have aught to fear from it, but the determined enemies of God; and none can object to it, without finding fault with infinite perfection. What then can rational creatures deem preferable to this absolute dominion? What can a penitent sinner desire more than the uncontrollable rule of infinite mercy? Let us, therefore, rejoice that "the Lord reigneth."—SCOTT.

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