

# THE CHOICE: MAN'S OR GOD'S

*“According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world...being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.”—Ephesians 1:4, 11*

ONE day several years ago, the surveyor was working on our street, checking the property lines of vacant lots where new houses were to be built. I noticed that he was very careful about placing his transit-compass, the instrument surveyors use for measuring. When I questioned him about it, he told me that it was absolutely necessary to locate the exact point-of-beginning before any surveying could be done. His transit-compass had to be set precisely over this point, for otherwise all the work would be in vain. If the point-of-beginning were wrong, everything else in the whole area surveyed would be wrong, too; property lines would be confused, and houses misplaced; and the courts would be overrun with cases of angry citizens whose property rights had been violated. So great is the danger, that builders refuse to begin their work until the surveyor has completed his.

There is a lesson in that for a world that is badly askew. Sin has brought disorder and chaos. But the problem has been immensely complicated by our failure to find the right *point-of-beginning* in the matter of our salvation. We are always prone to think that we must begin with man—which is another evidence of our sinfulness. We should begin with *God*; He is the only right point-of-beginning in the search for salvation (Joh 1:1). And if we don't begin with Him, we will only go farther astray.

Not only in the world at large but even in the history of the Christian Church do we find evidence of our failure on this score. Both preaching and theology, whether conservative or liberal, have often made *man*, instead of God, the point-of-beginning. We are so easily tempted to be man-centered in our conception of the Gospel. Evangelism seems to be more appealing that way, and theology, too. But that humanistic approach has often led the Church astray, for it invariably accommodates the Word of God to suit the notions of men. In fact, almost every instance of heresy in the history of the Church can be traced directly to that *wrong* point-of-beginning.

You cannot bring men back to God unless that way of their salvation begins with God. Humanism always ends where it starts, namely, with man. The Bible also ends where it starts, namely with God—which is where we want to be, isn't it? The predicament in which we sinners find ourselves is so utterly hopeless that divine redemption is our only way out. The Bible says, what we know to be true from our own honest introspection, that we are “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1). And such dead men cannot begin their own resurrection. They must be raised by another—by God. You cannot expect sinners who are depraved by nature to initiate the work of their own redemption. It will have to be initiated by God.

Now the Word of God proves beyond all doubt that He is our point-of-beginning. The classic passage on that is Ephesians 1:4-12. Among other things, it says: “He hath chosen us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world...having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will...in whom [Christ] also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.”

Now that doctrine of divine election is mentioned no less than forty-eight times in the New Testament alone. And no wonder, for it is one of the grandest things we know about God. His plan of redemption is not an afterthought, something He had to devise when man fell into sin; it was not occasioned by the contingencies of history, nor does it depend upon the will of man. From eternity God chose sinners to be saved, and He did so according to the good pleasure of His will without qualifying conditions of any kind. It was His doing. Its point-of-beginning is with Him in eternity, where also its end will be. This means that our salvation has its origin as well as its destiny in the everlasting God!

However, oddly enough, this glorious truth, which is one of the fundamentals of our faith, is also one of the most controversial teachings in the Bible. It makes some people stiffen with resistance and even wince with pain every time they hear it. This is particularly true among certain Christians who have a more humanistic theology. And, of course, the reason for their antagonism is quite natural. For the other side of this glorious truth is that if God chose to save some, He necessarily chose not to save others. So, He is not only a God of election but also of reprobation. And that's the part men don't like.

They seem to feel under obligation to defend the character of God against the stigma and responsibility of election and reprobation. The fact that God very plainly assumes this responsibility does not seem to impress them at all. They believe it is better to have men choose God than to have God choose men. And so they take the ultimate decision, as to who will be saved, out of the hands of God and place it in the hands of men, who must then make the choice themselves. And thereby they make man the point-of-beginning and ending, the alpha and omega of his own salvation. They think man can frustrate God if he wants to.

Now, personally, I am deeply grateful that the Bible presents a God who chooses the sinner, rather than a God who must wait to be chosen. I know that teaching confronts us with some very real and difficult questions which we shall never be able to answer, but I would rather live with those questions than try to escape them by adopting humanistic notions that conflict with God's own revelation of Himself. The fact that we cannot comprehend the mystery of His mercy does not disprove it.

After all, He would be a pretty small God if the sinful human mind could comprehend Him. And if His plan of salvation were comprehensible, if we could make it fit our thinking, it would be like all human plans of salvation which make sense to us but never save us from our sins.

There are so many things we don't understand about God. As the Bible says, His ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts; He is past finding out. That's because He is *God!* And we ought not to allow our unanswered questions about Him and His Word to prevent us from believing what He declares to be true, even when that conflicts with the confused reasoning of our sinful minds. If we cannot bow humbly and modestly before Him, we have lost our God, and then we have lost also the only real point-of-beginning in the matter of our salvation.

It is interesting to observe that contemporary theologians, both conservative and liberal, who evidently do not believe this Biblical doctrine of divine election, are nevertheless compelled to recognize its underlying principle. Here is one, for example, who says: "In Christianity the initiative is always with *God*, never with man. All human action is just our response to the active prompting of the living God. It may be an obedient response, or a perverse and willful response. This conception distinguishes Christianity from all other faiths...Before we seek Him, He is out in search of us; and when we think we are discovering some new truth, we are in reality apprehending His self-revelation...Man did not come here by his own volition; he was *brought* here. God was here before man arrived!"

Well, of course that's right. But then why should we try to take the initiative away from God when it comes to the matter of our own salvation? That certainly proves the perversity of our sinful human nature, doesn't it? Consider what is at stake here.

To begin with, how could you ever become a Christian if you had to choose God rather than be chosen by Him? Why, you know from your own experience as well as from the Word of God that the natural inclination of your soul is away from God, not toward Him. If He left the matter up to you, do you think you would ever make the right choice? If God did not choose you and then find you in your sin, do you think you would ever choose Him and then find salvation in Him? (See Jer 31:19 and Rom 5:5-6.)

Furthermore, how could we ever bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to sinners if we didn't know that God chose from eternity those who will be saved? Consider the inconsistency of it. We tell men that they are hopelessly lost, dead in trespasses and sins, as the Bible says. But then we would proceed to tell them to do something which is utterly impossible for dead men to do, namely, to turn from sin and give their hearts to God. Now those two things are self-contradictory, aren't they?

The only way we can make sense with the Gospel is to tell sinners that God has done something about their sinful condition; and not only that He has made salvation available, but that He has actually chosen from eternity those who will receive it; and that they will choose Him precisely because He first chose them. As Paul put it in Romans 8: "Whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son...whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified. What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?...Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth" (Rom 8:29-31, 33).

The whole mission effort of the Christian Church rests ultimately upon this doctrine of divine election. Even before we go out into the world with the Gospel of Christ, we know that it cannot fail. For those whom God has chosen from eternity will be called, and justified, and glorified. They will be saved, not first of all because they want God, but because He wants them. When we go out with the Gospel, we don't know in advance who the chosen ones are, but we do know that the Gospel will find them, whoever and wherever they are.

This is the secret of the phenomenal success of the mission effort of the early Church. For example, when Paul and Barnabas preached at Antioch, they found a ready response among the Gentiles, who "glorified the word of the Lord." All of them? No, not all of them. How many? Well, we find the answer in Acts 13:48—"As many as were ordained to eternal life believed." Now that's the whole story of New Testament missions.

The same thing is true today. We preach the Gospel everywhere. But only those whom God has chosen actually believe it. There is no other way to explain the difference between a believer and an unbeliever. Both are sinners by nature. The believer is no better than the unbeliever—perhaps worse in some respects. The difference lies in the good pleasure of God, who knows what He is doing, even when He doesn't tell us what it is and why He does it. As the apostle John put it, those who receive Him, and who thus become the sons of God, are "born, not of blood, nor of the will of man, but of God" (Joh 1:12).

No, Christianity is not a failure in this world because so many people reject it. God never intended to save all men. He tells us plainly in His Word that He has chosen some and not others. And if that disturbs us, if it raises questions in our minds about the justice and love of God, then let us seriously ponder the solemn fact if God had not done the choosing, none of us would ever choose Him! And whatever He does with the rest of us is His business, not ours. One thing is certain: we would never find salvation if it were up to us to find it.

Sometimes you will hear people say this doctrine makes men complacent and careless about the matter of their salvation, for they are made to feel that there is nothing they can do about it anyway, since everything depends upon God; if they are chosen, they will be saved somehow; and if not, well, nothing they do will make any difference.

But is that really true? Do you know any unbeliever who actually uses that as an excuse for his unbelief? No, of course not. That's not why he rejects the Gospel. The only people who raise that objection are Christians who think this doctrine will offend and antagonize those whom they want to win for Christ. How strange that God doesn't have the same fear! He certainly wants to bring sinners to Christ, and yet He doesn't hesitate to use this doctrine to call them! And Christ Himself did the same thing. He said: "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (Joh 6:44). Are we supposed to be wiser than God? Do we think we can make the Gospel more appealing and more effective if we omit this basic doctrine of divine election, and let sinners think that their salvation depends upon their own free will, which is sinful and depraved, rather than upon the sovereign will of God?

Which is really the more compelling thing to say to men who are sinners by nature, prone to evil, slaves of sin—that they must choose God, or that God must choose them? Which would you rather have me tell you—that God cannot save you unless you first come to Him, or that He has come to you because you would not and could not come to Him?

Well, to ask the question is to answer it. And Christians like to put that answer in the words of an old hymn:

*T'is not that I did choose Thee, For, Lord, that could not be;  
This heart would still refuse Thee, Hadst Thou not chosen me.  
Thou from the sin that stained me Hast cleansed and set me free;  
Of old Thou hast ordained me, That I should live to Thee.*

—Peter Eldersveld