

HORATIO BONAR'S LETTER ON ELECTION

Bonar began with two texts and then continued his explanation. "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Mt. 22:14). "As many as were ordained to eternal life believed." Acts 13:48.

You know what a very prominent place in Scripture the doctrine of election holds. It meets us everywhere, both in the Old and new Testament. Whatever may be the meaning of the word, one cannot help feeling that the truth which it expresses must, in God's sight, be a vitally important one.

But, how can this be the case, if it means no more than God's choosing those that choose Him? If it means no more than God's choosing those whom he foresaw would believe of their own accord and by their own power, it is not worthy of the prominent place it holds in Scripture; nay, it is not worthy of a separate name, least of all of such a name as election. If there be any election at all in such a case, it is plainly not God's election of man, but man's election of God. So that the question comes to be simply this, Does election mean God's choosing man, or man's choosing God? It cannot mean both; it must be either the one or the other. Which of the two can any reasonable being suppose it to mean?

ELECTION GOD'S PROVINCE

As the right understanding of this word is of great importance, I think it well to note down a few passages, which will help to shed light upon the meaning of the word. "The man's rod, whom *I shall choose*, shall blossom" (Num. 17:5). "Thou shalt set him king over thee, whom the Lord thy God *shall choose*" (Deut. 17:15). "Did *I choose him* out of all the tribes of Israel?" (1 Sa. 2:28). "The place which the Lord *hath chosen*, to put his name there" (Deut. 12:21). "Them the Lord thy God *hath chosen* to minister unto him." (Deut. 21:5). "Jerusalem the city which *I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel*" (1 Ki. 9:32). "The Lord *chose me*, before all the house of my father, to be king over Israel" (1 Chron. 28:4). "For his elect's sake whom he *hath chosen*" (Mk. 13:20). "He is a *chosen vessel* unto me" (Acts 9:15). "I know whom I have *chosen*" (John 15:15). "According as he *hath chosen us* in him before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). "God hath from the beginning *chosen you* unto salvation" (2 Thes. 2:13).

These are but a few out of the many passages that might have been selected. But they are quite enough to show the meaning of the word. No one who wishes to take words plainly as he finds them, can find any difficulty in understanding what choosing or election means, after reading such passages as these.

I would just ask, what does the word in common speech mean? When we speak of the election of a member of Parliament, does that mean that the member first had chosen himself? No such theory of election would be listened to for a moment in such matters. Election has but one meaning there. It means the people's choosing their representatives by a distinct act of their own will. And shall man have his will, and shall not God have his? Shall man have his choice, and shall God not have his?

But let us take an instance from the Bible. What does God's choosing Abraham mean? He is a specimen of a sinner saved by grace; a sinner called out of the world by God. Well, how did this choosing take place? Did not God choose him long before he ever thought of choosing God? Were there not thousands more in Chaldea that God might have chosen,

and called, and saved, had he pleased? Yet, he chose Abraham alone. And what does the Bible call this procedure on the part of God? It calls it *election*. “Thou art the Lord, the God who didst *choose* Abraham and broughtest him forth out of Ur of the Chaldees” (Neh. 2:7). Does any one say, “O, but God chose Abraham because he foresaw that Abraham would choose him?” I answer the case is precisely the reverse of this. He chose Abraham just because he saw that otherwise Abraham would not choose Him. It was God’s foreseeing that Abraham would not choose him, that made election necessary. And so it is with us. God chooses us, not because he foresees that we would choose him, or that we would believe, but for the very opposite reason. He chooses us just because he foresees that we would neither choose him nor believe of ourselves at all. Election proceeds not upon foreseen faith in us, but upon foreseen unbelief.”

THE EXPRESSION OF GOD’S WILL

The truth is, that election has no meaning, if it be not the expression of God’s will in reference to particular persons and things — saying to each, thus and thus shalt thou be, not because thou chooseth to be so, but because I, the infinite Jehovah, see fit that thou shouldst be so. To one creature he says, thou shalt be an angel, to another thou shalt be a man. To one order of beings, thou shalt dwell in Heaven, to another, thou shalt dwell on earth. To one man, thou shalt be born in Judea, where my name is named and my temple stands; to another, thou shalt be born in Egypt, or Babylon where utter darkness reigns. To one he says, thou shalt be born in Britain, and hear the glad tidings; to another, thou shalt be born in Africa, where no gospel has ever come. Thus he expresses his will, and who can resist it? What can find fault, or say to him, what doest Thou? Men may object to being placed thus entirely at the disposal of God, but the apostle’s answer to such is, “Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?” Election, then, is the distinct putting forth of God’s sovereign will, for the purpose of bringing a thing to pass which, but for the explicit going forth of that will, would not have come to pass.

But does this not lead to the conclusion that *sin* is the direct result of God’s decree? Does it not teach us that it is God and not man that produces sin? No, God does not foreordain sin, but he decrees to allow man to sin. God is holy, and hates sin. He does not lead men into it; neither does he decree to lead men into it. But he decrees that, for infinitely wise ends, the creature should be permitted to fall, and sin to be perpetuated.

1. God forces no man to sin, either by what he decrees or what he does, either by commanding or constraining or alluring.
2. It is absurd to say that if we hold that God is the author of evil; that if he, from eternity, purposed to create what is good in man, he must therefore have purposed to create that which is evil. It is absurd to say, that if I hold that it is God who sets my will *right* I must hold that it was God who set it *wrong*.
3. God frequently gave predictions of evil long before the time. Of course, then, if evil be predicted regarding either nations or individuals, it must be fixed and sure. He predicted the curse on Canaan and his descendants. But does that prove that he delighted in the curse, or that he was the author of it, or that those who were the instruments of inflicting it, and so fulfilling the prophecy, were guiltless?
4. Even our opponents admit that there are some events decreed beforehand, such as the birth and death of Christ, the judgment day, etc. If, then, they admit that he

has decreed a single event, they are in precisely the same difficulty in which they seek to fix us. If one event is decreed, what not all? Who is to draw the line and say these are decreed, but those are not? God's will has already fixed one or two, and is man's will, or chance, to settle the rest?

THE SINNER MUST WILL

I know that the sinner must have a *will* in the matter too. It is absurdity to speak of a sinner loving, believing, etc., against his will, or by compulsion. The sinner must doubtless *will*. He must will to refuse, and he must will to receive Christ. He must will to take the broad way, and he must will to take the narrow way. His will is essential to all these movements of his soul. But in what state do we find his will at present? We find it is wholly set against the truth. Every will since the fall is wholly opposed to God and his Word. Man needs no foreign influence, no external power to make him reject the truth. That he does by nature. He hates it with his whole heart. When a sinner then comes to receive the truth, how is this accomplished? Does he renew himself? Does he change the enmity of his will by the unaided act of his will? Does he of himself bend back his own will into the opposite direction? Does he by a word of his own power cause the current that had been flowing down hill to change its course and flow upward? Does his own will originate the change in itself, and carry the change into effect? Impossible. The current would have flowed forever downward had it not been arrested in its course by something stronger than itself. The sinner's will would have remained forever in depravity and bondage, had not another will, mightier far than itself, come into contact with it, and altered both its nature and curse, working in the sinner "both to will and to do." Was the sinner willing before this other will met his? No! Was he willing after? Yes. Then, is it not plain that it was God's will, meeting and changing his, that made the difference? God's will was first. It was God's will that began the work and made the sinner willing. He never would have willed had not God made him willing. "Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power." (Psa. 110:3). It is the power of Jehovah applied to us that makes us willing. Till that is applied, we are unwilling. It is his hand, operating directly upon the soul, that changes its nature and its bent. Were it not for that, our unwillingness would never be removed. No outward means, or motives would be sufficient to effect the change; for all these means and motives are rejected by the sinner; nor does he become willing even to allow the approach or application of these means and motives till God makes him willing.

To speak of his being changed by that which he rejects is as absurd as to speak of a man's being healed by a medicine which he persists in refusing. "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?"

Are all, then, willing? Does not the depraved will remain in most, while the new will appears in few? What makes the difference? God's choice. "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight." "Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honor, and another unto dishonor?" "Except the Lord of Hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom and we should have become like unto Gomorrah."

DOES GOD HINDER?

Does God then hinder sinners from believing and willing? No — by no means. He hinders none. They are their own hindrance. “Ye will not come to me that ye might have life.” Not one soul would be saved if left to his own will. But, in his infinite mercy, God does not leave them to their own wills. He puts forth his mighty power on some to make them willing. Were it not for this, all would be lost, for all would reject the Saviour.

But is not this unjust? Is God dealing fairly with his creatures in making some willing, and leaving the rest to their unwillingness? What! Are we to prohibit God from saving any, unless he saves all? Are we to accuse him of injustice because he leaves some to reap the fruits of their labors of unbelief, and delivers others from them? Is God unjust in saving whom he will, when all were lost?

Some are given to accusing us of making God guilty of partiality. As if they were singular in their zeal for God’s honor, they exclaim, “We cannot bear a partial God!” Partiality means, of course, injustice; it means also that the sinner has a right to favor from God. They must show then that for God to save some when all were lost is unjust. They must show that all sinners had a right to his favor, for if none had any right, there can be no partiality. But if this theory be true, then God was partial in not providing a Saviour for fallen angels. He was partial in choosing Israel, and not choosing Babylon or Egypt, as the nation to whom he made himself known. He was partial in sending prophets to Israel, and not to Tyre and Sidon. He was partial in doing his mighty works in the land of Judea. And Jesus was partial in commanding his disciples not to go to other Gentiles or Samaritans. In short, if sovereignty be partiality, then the Bible is full of it. And it would be just as well for these men to say at once what their theory implies — that God is not at liberty to act as he pleases, but only as man may dictate!

But why does God save some and not all? Because such is the “good pleasure of his will.” He has infinitely wise reasons for this, though we understand them not. Might we not with equal propriety ask: Why did he keep some angels from falling? And why did he allow others to fall? Or, may we not ask: Why did he not think of saving angels, why think of saving men alone? Is he not at liberty to create as many worlds and as many beings as he pleases? And when these are ruined is he not at liberty to redeem as many or as few as he pleases?

MAN IS TOTALLY DEPRAVED

The real question in all this, is just: Are all men so depraved that they will not be saved unless God puts forth his mighty power? If so, then, it is plain that God must put forth his mighty power to save everyone that is saved; and surely he is at liberty to choose whom he is to save. If indeed men are not totally depraved, then there is no need for the interposition of God's hand either in choosing or in saving. But admit man’s total ruin and depravity, and you must admit the direct putting forth of the arm of Jehovah. And hence it is that many, in our day are beginning to deny man’s total depravity by nature. They are smoothing down the expressions referring to it in Scripture, and claiming for man as much remaining power and goodness as will enable him in part to save himself, and do it without the interposition God.

The following remarks of Calvin will show that in his day none but “Papist theologians” held the doctrine that God elects men because he foresaw that they will believe.

“The Papist theologians have a distinction current among themselves, that God does not elect men according to the works which are in them but that he chooses those who he foresees will be believers. And therein they contradict what we have already alleged from St. Paul, for he saw that we are chosen and elected in him, ‘that we might be holy and without blame.’ Paul must needs have spoken otherwise if God elected us having foreseen that we should be holy, but he has not used such language. He says, he hath elected us that we might be holy. He infers therefore that faith depends upon election. Those who think otherwise, know not what man and human nature is.”

Such is the testimony of Calvin against the Papist theologians of his day. Since that time many have joined the ranks of those theologians, and glory in their heresies.

Oh, but it is said, we do not deny election. We merely maintain that God elected those whom he foresaw would believe. I answer, this is a total denial of election; and it is either dishonesty or ignorance to call this by such a name. God elected those whom he foresaw would believe! And who were they? None — absolutely none. He foresaw that none would believe, not one. And because he foresaw this, he elected some to believe. Otherwise not one would ever have believed at all.

With regard to the foreseeing of who would believe, I have some difficulties to state. According to the Arminian theory, I may believe today and disbelieve tomorrow, according to my own will. I may thus go on believing and disbelieving alternately till the day of my death. God then one day foresees that I will believe, and he decrees to save me. But the next day he foresees me not believing, and he decrees that I should perish. How in such a case is the matter to be finally settled? Is it according to the state in which God foresees the sinner will be just at the last moment of his life? Or when? Let our opponents solve this difficulty, if they are able.

THE SCOFFER’S ARGUMENT

Oh, but some profane objector says, “Does God make men to be damned?” Let me in a few words answer the miserable atheism of such an objection; and I do it not out of regard for the pride of the objector, but for the sake of those who may be perplexed by this poor catch of an argument which is so freely and flippantly about — an argument which befits the scoffer only — an argument whose father is the father of lies. It is somewhat remarkable that this is precisely the argument of Universalists and Deists against the existence of such a place as Hell. If you speak of Hell or everlasting punishment to such, the answer is “Did God make men to damn them?” And however abominable and unscriptural their notion is, it is at least consistent with their own theory. Making God to be all love and nothing else, they think it inconsistent with his love that he should allow such a place as Hell in the universe.

But let me answer the question, no matter how profane it may be. God did not make men to damn them. He did not make the angels who kept not their first estate to damn them. He did not make Lucifer for the purpose of casting him out of Heaven. He did not make Adam for the sake of casting him out of Paradise. He did not make Judas for the purpose of sending him to his own place. God made man, every man and everything, to *glorify* Himself. And this, every creature, man and angel, must do, either actively or passively, either willingly or unwillingly, actively and willingly in Heaven or passively and unwillingly in Hell. This is God’s purpose; and it shall stand. God may have many other

ends in creation; but this is the chief one, the ultimate one, the one which is above all the rest, and to which all the rest are subordinate.

In this sense, then, plainly, God did not make men either to destroy them or to save them. He made them for his own glory. If the question is asked, "Did God make the devil and his angels only to damn them?" I answer, "He made them for his own glory. They are lost forever; but does that prove he made them only to destroy them?" He kept their companions from falling, and hence they are called the "elect angels," while he did not keep the ones who fell. He could have kept them all by his power, yet he did not.. But does this prove he made them to destroy them? They fell, and in a moment were consigned to everlasting chains; he made no effort to save them — he sent no redemption to them. But does this prove that he made them only to destroy them? If ever such an accusation could be preferred against God, it must be in the case of angels, to whom no salvation was sent. It cannot be said of man, to whom a salvation has come.

Whatever is right for God to do, it is right for him to decree. If God's casting sinners into Hell be not wrong or unjust, then his purposing to do so from all eternity cannot be wrong or unjust. So that you must either deny that there is a Hell, or admit God's right to predetermine who are to dwell there forever. There is no middle way between election and universalism.

CONCLUSION

The texts that teach election are not to be explained away or overlooked. They are part of God's holy Word, just as much as "God is love." And if one class of texts is to be twisted or turned away from, shall not another? Let us fearlessly look both in the face; and let us believe them both, whatever difficulty we may find in reconciling them. Our first duty is to believe, not to reconcile. There are many things which in this life we shall be able to reconcile; but there is nothing in the Bible which we need to shrink from believing.