

A Sermon on Predestination

by C.F.W. Walther, translated by Aug. Crull

Blessed be God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: according as He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love: having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, wherein He hath made us accepted in the beloved (Eph. 1:3-6).

{Prayer}

Lord Jesus, Thou Son of the living God, who didst come into this world in order to save sinners: thanksgiving and blessing, and glory, and honor be unto Thee on this day of Thy gracious and blessed nativity, because Thou didst not only come into this world, in order to save also us poor sinners, but when we all like sheep had gone astray, as the good Shepherd Thou didst follow us, didst call us unto Thee through the shepherd's voice of Thy sweet Gospel, didst grant us faith in Thee, and hast kept us steadfast in this faith unto the present day. O, how may we ever thank Thee sufficiently in time and eternity? We did not seek Thee, but Thou didst seek us; we did not come unto Thee, but Thou didst come unto us. By what means did we deserve Thy mercy, which Thou hast bestowed upon us above millions of other men? Ah, it is only Thy undeserved grace to which we owe all this. Thou didst see us lying in the blood of our sins, when, behold! this sight broke Thy heart and Thou saidst unto us: "Thou shalt live!" Now then, O Lord Jesus, who once on this day didst give Thyself unto us, to-day we give ourselves unto Thee. Here is our heart! Take it, cleanse it and adorn it as Thy dwelling-place, and rule and reign in it, until we die. And with all angels and archangels, with all cherubim and seraphim, with all thrones and dominions, with all the blessed and elect we will give Thee thanks, praise, glory, and honor for ever and ever. Amen.

IN THE NEW-BORN SAVIOUR DEARLY BELOVED BRETHERN AND SISTERS!

You have kindly invited me to come to you and to preach a sermon on predestination for you on this twofold festival day, the day of Christmas and the dedication of your church. Cheerfully I have obeyed your call, in order to comply with your request, if God will lend me His gracious assistance.

There are, indeed, some persons who subscribe to the opinion that the mysterious doctrine of predestination should not be preached at all before the common Christian people; that it is rather a doctrine for the learned only. But this is a gross error. St. Paul writes to Timothy: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness"; and to the Romans he writes: "Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope." If, however, according to these words, "all scripture," that is, everything contained in the Scriptures of the New and Old Testaments, is never injurious, but in so many ways "profitable": the doctrine of predestination, too, if presented correctly, can never be injurious, but must, on the contrary, be exceedingly profitable; for the Holy Scriptures do not

touch upon this doctrine only now and then on rare occasions, and by no means with obscure words, but they treat of this doctrine in many places, and that no less plainly than thoroughly. Allow me to remind you briefly of but a few passages of the New Testament which treat of predestination.

In the first place, as regards Christ Himself, He refers to predestination on divers occasions. Firstly He closes two different parables, in order to comprise them in a summary, with the warning words: "For many be called, but few chosen," namely the parables of the laborers in the vineyard and of the marriage of the King's son. Again, in order to comfort His disciples in the hatred of the world, Christ said unto them: "If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you."

Again, in order to humble His disciples wholesomely, whom He had exalted so highly, and to put down all self-praise in their hearts and mouths, Christ said unto them: "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you."

Again, in order to strengthen the heart of His disciples against the great danger of being deceived in the latter times, Christ said unto them: "There shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect," thus assuring them that this is impossible.

Again, in order to inspire His disciples with courage, after having foretold them the great calamities of the latter days, Christ said: "Except that the Lord had shortened those days, no flesh should be saved: but for the elect's sake, whom He hath chosen, He hath shortened the days."

Again, in order to assure His faithful followers of the certainty that their prayers are heard, Christ said: "Shall not God avenge His own elect, which cry day and night unto Him?"

Again, in order to prepare His apostles for the apostasy of their fellow-apostle Judas Iscariot the traitor, that they might not be offended and scandalized by this grievous dreadful downfall of even an apostle, Christ said unto them: "I speak not of you all: I know whom I have chosen."

Finally, in order to strengthen the hope of the believers, that on the last day they all shall certainly enter into everlasting life, Christ said unto them: "Then He shall send His angels, and shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from the uttermost part of the earth to the uttermost part of heaven."

In the second place, as regards the holy apostles, they followed closely the steps of Christ in the doctrine of predestination, being enlightened and moved by the Holy Spirit. Thus, for instance, the Corinthians, who were so rich in knowledge and other gifts, are warned also by St. Paul against self-conceitedness, in the following words: "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: that no flesh should glory in His presence." But to the Thessalonians, in order to comfort them in their tribulations, the same apostle, in the first epistle addressed to them, writes the following: "Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God"; and in his second epistle he adds the exhortation: "But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation." In the same manner he encourages the Colossians, as follows: "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies," etc. But in order to strengthen their faith, the apostle Peter calls the whole body of believing Christians in

plain terms “the chosen generation,” and the believing sojourners of the Dispersion, to whom he writes, he salutes as “the strangers elect.” Finally, in order to guard the rich against haughtiness, St. James says: “Hath not God chosen the poor of this world, rich in faith?” These few instances, however, will suffice.

Behold, like a thread of gold the doctrine of predestination is drawn through the whole Bible. Christ as well as all the holy apostles make use of this doctrine, sometimes in order to strengthen faith, sometimes in order to enliven hope; now for consolation, now for encouragement, now for humiliation; sometimes in order to incite believers to pray with unwavering faith, at other times in order to warn and guard them against unbelief, sin, and apostasy. How useful and profitable, therefore, must be this doctrine!

Not to mention the fact, however, that in many passages election of grace is spoken of, although this word is not used, for instance, when the Scriptures speak of those that are called according to God’s purpose; of those that are ordained to eternal life; of those that the Father has given to Christ; of those that are redeemed from the earth and from among men, being the firstfruits; of those whose names are written in heaven, and so forth; I say, not to mention this fact, the doctrine of predestination is treated at the greatest length in two principal and fundamental passages of Holy Writ, namely first in the epistle to the Romans, in the second half of the eighth chapter and in the entire ninth, tenth, and eleventh chapters, and secondly in the first chapter of the epistle to the Ephesians.

This latter passage I have selected as my text to-day. In accordance with it let me, therefore, speak to you now:

On Predestination or Election of Grace and with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, I will answer, according to the words of our text, the following five questions:

1. Who are these persons whom God has elected?
2. When has this election taken place?
3. To what purpose has God chosen the elect?
4. What are the causes that induced God to elect them? and finally,
5. How should a Christian properly use the true doctrine of election of grace to his salvation?

I. The first question, therefore, which I have to answer to-day is this: Who are the persons whom God has elected?

This very question is answered by the holy apostle in the very first words of our text, where it reads as follows: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: according as He hath chosen us.” Who, then, according to these words, are those persons whom God has elected? The apostle says: “As He hath chosen us.” But who are the “us,” of whom St. Paul speaks here? Evidently, on the one hand, St. Paul himself, the writer of these words, and on the other hand those persons to whom he wrote the epistle, namely the believing Ephesians. From what, however, did St. Paul conclude that not only he himself, but also the Ephesians were of the number of those whom God has elected? This the apostle shows us by the preceding words: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ,” to which words he immediately adds: “According as he hath chosen us.” The apostle evidently means to say this: What reason could I have, ye dear Ephesians, to doubt that God has

chosen you as well as me, since I see that God has already “blessed you with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ”? For ye have not only been redeemed by Christ, like all mankind, but ye have also been called through the word of the Gospel, and have been enlightened with the gifts of the Holy Ghost, that means to say, ye have been granted true faith in Christ, and by this faith ye have been justified and sanctified! Therefore it is quite certain that ye also are among those whom God has elected. In the same manner, in which St. Paul deals with the Ephesians in our text, he deals in another passage also with the Christians of Rome, who on account of their faith had been obliged to suffer a great many tribulations. For, in order to comfort them, St. Paul in his epistle to the Romans, addresses to them also the following words: “We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He did foreknow,” that is, elect, “He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He did predestinate, them He also called: and whom He called, them He also justified: and whom He justified, them He also glorified.” The apostle means to say: Ye dear Christians of Rome have no reasons at all to doubt whether God has elected you also; for let me ask you did not God call you through the word of the Gospel? did He not by this means grant you faith, and were ye not justified by faith in the sight of God? and do ye not also suffer persecution on account of this faith? Behold, such people, and only such people, are the very persons whom God has elected.

Therefore, beloved, do ye also perceive from this, that for believing Christians the doctrine of predestination is by no means a dreadful and horrible doctrine, necessarily making them doubt whether they also shall be saved, because they might not be elected. No, on the contrary, it is the most consolatory of all doctrines, a doctrine which is to render believers quite certain of their salvation. Predestination does by no means hang over the heads of believing Christians like a dark, black, threatening thundercloud, so that they would always have to ask anxiously: Alas, am I also one of the elect? No, far from being a dark cloud, the doctrine of predestination is, on the contrary, a radiant sun of grace, consolation, and joy, rising on every man, as soon as he is called through the Gospel and thereby is made a believer.

Consequently, my answer to the first question: Who are those persons, whom God has elected? is in short this: The true believers.

Therefore also the Confessions of our Church, namely the Formula of Concord, speaks as follows: “The eternal election or predestination of God, that is, the ordaining of God unto salvation, does not pertain both to the good and to the bad, but only to the children of God, who were elected and ordained to eternal life.”

II. Let us now proceed to our second question: When has this election taken place?

Also to this question the holy apostle gives us a plain answer in our text, where it reads: “According as He hath chosen us in Him BEFORE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD.”

Predestination, then, does not take place in time. According to the Bible God does not wait until men are born and live in this world, to elect them only then, when He sees that they have converted and conducted themselves well unto the end of their lives. No, before they were born and had done anything good, yea, before God had laid the foundation of the world, before

heaven and earth, the sun, the moon, and the stars had been created, when nothing else was in existence but God alone, in short, already in eternity this election has taken place. Human beings, indeed, do many a thing which they themselves had no thought of, much less resolved upon beforehand; but God, who knows and governs everything, has not only foreknown already from eternity everything that He does in time, but has also foredetermined already from eternity to do it. Therefore St. Paul, in his second epistle to Timothy, says that the grace of the elect is given them “before the world began.” Therefore also, on the last day, Christ will say to the elect: “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” Therefore also our Church, in the Formula of Concord, confesses publicly before all Christendom: “Not only, before we had done any good, but also before we were born, yea, before the foundation of the world, He elected us in Christ.”

O my dear hearers, with what fervent and unspeakable love the heart of God must burn toward us Christians, that He thought of us, took counsel and made a decree concerning us, already before we were born, yea, even before He had created the world, consequently from all eternity! This is a love, higher than the heavens, wider than the world, deeper than the sea, and as everlasting as eternity. Therefore we may rejoice with the poet:

*It is that mercy never ending,
Which all conception far transcends,
Of Him, who, with love's arms extending,
To wretched sinners condescends;
Whose heart with pity still doth break,
Whether we seek Him, or forsake.*

III. Let us now try to find the answer to our third question:
To WHAT PURPOSE has God chosen the elect?

In our text we find the answer of the Holy Spirit to this question also. For there we read: “According as He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be HOLY AND WITHOUT BLAME BEFORE HIM IN LOVE: having predestinated us UNTO THE ADOPTION OF CHILDREN BY JESUS CHRIST TO HIMSELF.”

According to these words, therefore, God in choosing the elect had chiefly two purposes in view, namely first, that they should be truly converted unto Him, and secondly, that they should become His beloved children. For the words of our text: God hath chosen us, “that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love,” mean nothing else but this: God hath chosen us, that we should be truly converted unto Him; for only by a true conversion of the heart man is made “holy and without blame before Him in love.” And the subsequent words of our text: “Having predestinated us UNTO THE ADOPTION OF CHILDREN by Jesus Christ to Himself,” again mean nothing else but this: God hath chosen us that by faith in Christ we should become His beloved children; for only by faith man becomes a beloved child of God. St. Paul, therefore, writes to the Galatians: “Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus,” and St. John writes in the first chapter of his gospel: “As many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name.”

What? is not this something glorious? to be predestinated by God from eternity unto repentance, conversion, and sanctification as well as unto the adoption of children of God, and consequently unto faith? For if we are chosen and predestinated unto this, we are chose and predestinated also unto salvation, for Christ says: “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.” The apostle Paul, therefore, says also in explicit terms that we are elected unto salvation also, for in his second epistle to the Thessalonians he writes: “But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation, through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth.” Therefore also in the last confession of our Church, namely in the Formula of Concord, we read as follows: “But the eternal election of God not only foresees and foreknows the salvation of the elect, but through His gracious will and good pleasure in Christ Jesus, is also a cause which procures, works, facilitates, and promotes our salvation and whatever pertains to it; and upon this our salvation is so firmly grounded that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it; for it is written: ‘Neither shall any pluck my sheep out of my hand’; and again: ‘And as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.’”

O how firmly established, therefore, is your salvation, ye dear elect believing children of God. Ye may rejoice with Paul Gerhardt:

*Should Satan league his forces,
God’s purpose to withstand,
Think not their rage and curses,
Can stay His lifted hand!
When He makes known His pleasure,
The counsel of His will,
That, in its utmost measure,
Will He at last fulfill.*

IV. We now pass to our fourth question, namely: What are the causes that induced God to choose the elect?

Also this question our text answers clearly and plainly in the following words: “Having predestined us unto the adoption of children BY JESUS CHRIST to Himself, ACCORDING TO THE GOOD PLEASURE OF HIS WILL, TO THE PRAISE OF THE GLORY OF HIS GRACE, wherein He hath MADE us accepted in the beloved.”

From these words, therefore, we see that there were but two causes that induced God to predestinate the elect unto the adoption of children and unto everlasting salvation. Namely the first cause, according to our text, was “the good pleasure of His will,” or “the glory of His grace,” wherein He hath “made them accepted.” But the second cause was “Jesus Christ,” that is to say, His most holy merit, which He has earned for all men by His life, suffering, and death.

Behold, my dear hearers, God has not foreseen in His elect anything good which he might have regarded and which therefore might have induced Him to elect them; on the contrary, he saw them lying in the blood of their sins, and then He said: “Ye shall live!”

Nor has God regarded that they were already acceptable to Him, and elected them for that reason; on the contrary, as our text has it, “He hath MADE them accepted in the beloved.”

Nor has God regarded that by repentance and conversion they had already tuned away from the world, and elected them on that account; on the contrary, as Christ says to His disciples, He has “chosen them OUT OF THE WORLD,” consequently out of the number of unbelievers, among whom He saw them. God, therefore, has not regarded even faith itself nor elected them on account of their faith; on the contrary, because no man can acquire faith by his own efforts, He has determined from eternity, to work faith in them through the gospel and to preserve them in faith unto the end.

Therefore also our Church in her last symbol, namely in our dear Formula of Concord, makes the following profession: “It is written: ‘Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, wherein He hath made us accepted in the beloved.’ The following doctrine is, therefore, false and erroneous, namely, that not the mercy of God alone, and the most holy merit of Christ are the cause, but that in us also there is a cause of the election of God, on account of which God has elected us to everlasting life. For, not only before we had done any good, but also before we were born, He elected us in Christ.” So far our dear Formula of Concord.

And now I ask you, O believing Christians: Does not your own experience confirm this doctrine? Who has given you faith? Did ye perhaps do it yourselves? Or is it not rather God the Holy Spirit, who by His power and grace has wrought faith in your hearts? What good deed did ye do, in order to obtain faith? It is true, ye went to church. But did ye not go to church with longing for faith, only when God had already kindled a little spark of faith in your hearts? Again it is true: Ye have not resisted stubbornly. But do ye owe this perhaps to your own heart, which by nature was good or at least better than the hearts of others? Or do ye not rather owe this to divine grace, only which overcame your resistance and opened your heart, as it did the heart of Lydia of old, that ye attended unto the Word? And ye that had not yet received a true, living faith before ye came to America: did ye perhaps emigrate to America for the sake of receiving true faith? Or did not rather God, the Ruler of your life, lead you to America that ye might find here the heavenly treasure of faith, while ye did not seek it, yea, while here ye were trying to find only temporal bread for you and yours? Upon the whole, did ye seek God? or did not rather God seek you? Did ye come unto God? or did not rather God come unto you? What, then once more I ask every believing Christian among you what, then, was the cause which induced God to elect you? By no means anything good within you, but only the unspeakable mercy of God and the most holy merit of Christ. Woe unto him that assigns the cause of his election to himself! He deprives God of that honor which is due to God alone.

V. But as the time to close draws near, I will only answer yet our fifth and last question: How should a Christian properly use the true doctrine of election of grace to his salvation?

It is true, my hearers, our text does not answer this question in particular and express words, but from the manner in which the doctrine of predestination is used and applied in our text by the holy apostle himself, we can see clear enough, how it is to be used by every believing Christian. But how does the apostle use it in our text? First, to comfort the believing Ephesians, and secondly, to admonish and to warn them. Its proper use, therefore, consists in these two points only. When, in the first place, the apostle writes to the Ephesians: “According as He hath chosen us,” he evidently shows that the believers among them were to derive comfort from

predestination, namely that they should be quite confident of being among the number of the elect. But far from asking them to judge, in reference to this point, according to their reason, or to the law, or to any external appearance, or to attempt to scrutinize the concealed, hidden depth of the divine predestination, he refers them, on the contrary, to the “spiritual blessings in heavenly places” (i.e. things), with which God had already blessed them and by which He had already revealed His will towards them. Behold, thus, therefore, all true Christians are to use the doctrine of predestination. Namely they must reason as follows: God had already “called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me” hitherto “in the true faith.” From this, then, I conclude that I am also one of the elect; for the way of the universal ordinance of grace is the only way in which God leads also His elect to salvation. They are chosen in Christ, the Book of Life; in Christ alone, therefore, they can and shall seek the Father’s eternal election. By the manner, therefore, in which God reveals Himself unto them through the Gospel, they are to perceive His secret decree which in eternity He has made concerning them. Therefore with the poet they may cheerfully say to Christ:

“In the print of the nails, used to crucify Thee, The eternal election of grace let me see”; and with St. Paul they may rejoice: “Who shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” O blessed, blessed are those Christians who in this manner use the doctrine of predestination and apply it to themselves! From this doctrine they derive consolation in all temptations of the flesh, the world, and the devil.

But in our text the apostle directs the attention of the Ephesians also to this, that God hath chosen them, that they “should be holy and without blame before Him in love.” Consequently also this appertains to the proper use of the doctrine of predestination, that, in the second place, the believing Christians are admonished by it to follow holiness in good earnest, and thus to “make their calling and election sure” by good works, as St. Peter writes; but that they are also warned by it, not to misuse this consolatory doctrine in growing secure. If, therefore, thou considerest thyself one of the elect, then do not forget that thou art predestinated not only unto the adoption of children and unto salvation, but also unto holiness. Remember that thou couldst indeed do nothing in order to be predestinated, but that thou canst do a great many things, which induced God already from eternity, not to predestinate, but to reprobate thee. For it is the earnest desire of God that all men should be saved; He has destined no one to damnation; in teaching the contrary, the Calvinists deny the clear word of God. No, all men are redeemed by Christ; to all, therefore, the Gospel is to be preached; God is willing to grant faith through the Gospel unto all, and also to preserve in this faith all that by His grace have obtained faith, and to grant them the grace of final perseverance. He, therefore, who is lost, is himself to blame; he is not lost, because God would not elect him, but only on account of his stubborn unbelief, on account of his stubborn resistance. In the book of the prophet Hosea, therefore, God says in clear and plain words: “O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself; but in me is thine help.”

Now then, beloved brethren and sisters in the Lord, ye who took patiently the spoiling of your goods, and would rather abandon your former large, fine church and schoolhouse than deny the true doctrine of predestination: O, remain steadfast! Even though ye are now decreed as fools, what does that signify, if your names are written in heaven!

In conclusion, therefore, let me remind you of what a pious poet sings:

Dear Christian, now make up thy mind
To fight, till death relieve thee;
Cast off whate'er they hands might bind,
Discourage and deceive thee.
If thou wouldst wear a crown forever,
Then risk thy life for Christ, thy Saviour;
For only victors in this strife
Receive the glorious crown of life.
Amen.