

ARTICLE IV.

SOME HOMILETIC USES OF THE DOCTRINE
OF ELECTION.

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It was Theodore Parker who said that Reason acknowledges no unnecessary or useless truths. With even greater force can it be affirmed that Revelation discloses no superfluous doctrines. The theory that the doctrine of election is of value only to the speculative theologian, as throwing light upon the *modus* of redemption, but not "profitable for instruction" to the church at large, is perilously near the affirmation that portions of the Scriptures were written to satisfy human curiosity. Certainly the apostle Paul does not embalm this doctrine in the wrappings of religious philosophy. It is as dear to him as the doctrine of the Cross itself. It fires his soul, and flames out in his epistles. It flashes at points, here and there, unexpectedly, in a word or phrase, showing how fully it possesses his mind. Take the letter to the Ephesians. It is keyed to this high pitch in the opening note: "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God." Then how the eager words tumble over one another through three chapters, as the impetuous pastor seeks to inspire his flock with the glorious conviction which is burning in his own soul, that he and they are picked men, divinely selected and ordained to the Christian life and inheritance. "According as he hath chosen us in him 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." "According to the

eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord." So in Romans ix.-xi. Although his aim here is more clearly doctrinal, and his method is polemical, the electing grace of God is evidently far more to him than a necessary factor in a theological system. His logic is on fire with it. In defending the Gentiles against the objection that to the Jews exclusively belong the covenants of promise, he is pleading for his converts, not for an abstraction in dogmatics. He is not offering the fact of predestination as a happy solution of a theological problem, but is arguing the exceeding riches of divine grace in the salvation of the outcast nations. And so the conclusion of the whole matter is not the *quod erat demonstrandum* of the logician, but the exultant pæan of the gospel herald, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!"

It is a significant but not a strange fact that Paul, of all inspired writers, should be the most fervid expositor of the doctrine of election. His very introduction of himself to his readers is in terms of the doctrine. "Paul, an apostle by the will of God." The doctrine describes the man. Indeed, the doctrine may almost be said to have taken on a Pauline personality, so instantly do we think of the apostle when we speak of this truth. And why should Paul, rather than another, be the foremost champion of electing grace? Because of his exceptional religious experience. A fascinating volume might be written on the relation of the Pauline theology to the personal dealings of God with the apostle. It could easily be shown that the truths on which he lays stress in his epistle are those which had been emphasized in his conversion and subsequent Christian growth. Especially would the fact of election appear to have grounded itself on his personal history. It was the wonder of his life that he, of all men, should have been selected of God to be saved himself, and to be a chosen vessel to bear Christ's name be-

fore Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel. He was vividly conscious of the fearful obstacles which divine grace had met and overcome in his conversion. No sooner was he alone in the house of Judas than the strangeness of his call came to his soul. He pondered over it. In Arabia the wonder of it increased as he meditated. Never to the end of his life could he think of it as anything but a marvel that God laid a saving hand on him, the blasphemer, the persecutor, and enlisted all his powers in the service of Christ. This wonder frequently expresses itself in the epistles in most humble allusions to his conversion and to the honors laid upon him as a herald of Christ. Nowhere, however, does he attempt to explain the mystery. Half the glory of election, to his mind, is in the fact that the problem admits of no solution. If he had experienced less of the fierce power of sin, he might perhaps have hinted at an explanation. Some men might suspect a tinge of self-merit, but not "the chief of sinners." Pelagius could explain election, Augustine never. If you ask the man who once set out for Damascus, "breathing out threatenings and slaughter," why he was arrested on the road in his wickedness, and by the grace of God exalted to the highest spiritual blessedness, he can only murmur, "the good pleasure of his will." We may fairly question whether that mystery is even now clear to Paul,—whether, as he stands in the very presence of the divine glory, and sees face to face, and rejoices in the grace which brought him there, he is not "lost in wonder" as well as in "love and praise."

No man is ready to preach the doctrine of election, until he has had something of this personal experience of it which fired Paul. It might be said that no Christian minister is prepared to proclaim any part of the gospel, until he is assured that he is "an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God;" and that, after he has once gained this assurance, he

will preach all truths with the fire and force of personal conviction. But it is peculiarly true that he must approach the doctrine of election along the avenue of personal experience, if he is to speak to edification. If he comes to it by way of his seminary lectures merely, or only along the road of philosophic investigation, his sermon will be as angular, hard, and heavy as the chiselled stone which the builder fits snugly into the arch. The Christian preacher is first of all a redeemed sinner, as unworthy of salvation as any of his hearers. If he knows his own heart he will often be filled with a sweet surprise at the position in which he finds himself, a chosen man, selected in his unworthiness, and ordained to the high honor and privilege of ministering the divine grace to his fellow-men. The more he ponders on it the greater will the marvel grow. It will sometimes seize him in the midst of his preaching. Whatever else grace may seem to be, it will more and more appear to him as "amazing grace." Once he sung of the happy day that fixed his choice on Christ. As his experience deepens, he will sing in his heart of the happy day that fixed Christ's choice on him. It will do him no harm to ask again and again, how it could be that he should have been elected to this blessedness, because such questioning will always force him back upon Paul's answer, "the good pleasure of his will." And he will leave the solution just there, where the Bible leaves it, and content himself with wondering, often saying to himself what Faber said:—

"Oh, gift of gifts! oh, grace of faith!
My God, how can it be
That thou, who hast discerning love,
Shouldst give that gift to me?"

Out of this personal experience of the truth the preacher will so present it, first of all, as to set before his hearers the meaning and the comfort of Christian sonship. The doctrine, rightly explained, will on the one hand define to the

mind of the church the true import of adoption into the family of God, and on the other hand will fortify the confidence of believers in the security of their standing in Christ. What is it to be a son of God? What makes us sons of God? These two vital questions believers will ask, and some answer will be entertained in the mind. Perhaps the inquiries will take a simpler form: Am I Christian? How do I know that I am a Christian? but the questions touch the foundations of religious life. Now let the preacher, in untechnical language, and with the sincerity of personal experience, unfold the truth that "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself." Let him simply open such a text and show what is in it,—the family of God's chosen ones—adoption into this family through Jesus Christ—God's eternal purpose in their redemption. If the believer has conceived of sonship merely as the imitation of certain virtues which he finds in Christ, will he not rejoice in this new inheritance? If he has thought that he was made a son "by the will of man," if his confidence has rested simply on the fact that once he "decided to be a Christian," will not his sense of security be greatly reinforced when thus he learns "what is the hope of his calling"? There is a wide difference between the assurance that I am trying to live for Christ and the knowledge that Christ is living in me. It is true that I hold Christ's hand, but the best truth is that Christ's mighty hand holds mine. My choice of Christ I may at times distrust, but Christ's choice of me sets my feet upon a rock. Indeed, it cannot too earnestly be urged upon the reflection of believers that they "were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." What is it to be a son in the Father's family? Not to improve the behavior, but to receive adoption. Not to do something with the hands, but to have something done in the heart. What makes us sons of God? His electing

grace, unmerited, resisted from the first, inscrutable, infinitely merciful and condescending. He chose us in Christ before the morning stars sang together. Then sonship is God's work in the soul.

The preacher will go on to show that the doctrine of election assures the believer of his continuance in the faith even unto the end. "If sons, then heirs." Adoption is the pledge of salvation "to the uttermost." It is interesting to observe how this corollary to the doctrine of election pressed upon Paul's mind in his discussion of the subject. There is in all his writings no more exultant burst of confidence in the believer's perseverance than the fervid climax of the eighth of Romans, beginning, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" And what is the ground of this challenge? God's electing grace. Look back a few verses. "Whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate." "If God be for us, who can be against us?" Faith in electing grace blossoms into the assured hope of eternal life. God chose us: then he will hold us fast. The love of Christ laid hold of us in our sin: then nothing can separate us from that love. There is a deal of inspiration in this comfortable old doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints. The perseverance, however, is not in the saints. "Old Adam is too strong for young Melanchthon." The grace of God perseveres. Christ himself suggested the true connection between electing grace and perseverance, before Paul pointed it out. "Those that thou gavest me, I have kept." "Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me." Again the contrast appears between the doubts and fears which arise when the Christian estimates his own powers, and the triumphant confidence which inspires him when he reflects on his standing as chosen of God. It is a familiar question which the pastor hears from anxious converts, "Shall I hold out?" It is the pastor's privilege to reply in the spirit of Paul's words to the Philippians, "Being confi-

dent of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." Hold out? Of course you will not hold out. It is divine grace that holds out. An eternity back God determined to glorify himself in your salvation. He has bestowed upon you adoption, and "the gifts and calling of God are without repentance." The Christian life does not consist in a series of human struggles to win heaven. "Loving God is but letting God love us." Even the inspired word almost seems to correct itself on this subject where it says, "But now, after that ye have known God," and immediately adds, "or rather are known of God." Not our knowledge of God, but his knowledge of us, is the warrant of our hope.

Turning to the relation of this doctrine to holy living, the preacher is tempted to present them in antithesis, as if utter reliance on electing grace might prove fatal to good works. He seeks to guard his hearers against the supposed evil consequences of trusting too much in God's choice of them, reminding them that, *although* they are chosen, they must *nevertheless* strive to lead righteous lives. The Scriptures never present the case in this way. They set forth the fact of election as a great incentive to, and a sure guarantee of, good works. "He that hath this hope in Him purifieth himself." It is a necessary sequence. The only results which can follow trust in electing grace are obedience, fidelity, unreserved consecration. The very end of election is Christian character to God's glory. Christ himself so teaches, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit." Paul repeats the thought to the Ephesians, "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;" and again to the Romans, "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son." In no other epistles as in

these does the apostle exalt believers as the elect of God. In no others does he lay so great stress upon the common duties of practical Christian living. In neither epistle is there any antagonism between the doctrine and the duties, but in both epistles doctrine and duties are related as tree and fruit. The preacher throws away much of the advantage he has gained in proclaiming the tender grace of God, when he partially retreats under cover of a *nevertheless*, and takes refuge in appeal to the conscience of his hearers. Let him follow up his advantage with a triumphant *therefore*, and capture the heart of his congregation. Let him not perpetrate an anti-climax similar to that of a military captain who should call forth a band of picked men to charge a fort, and, after inspiring them with the thought that they are chosen ones, should add, "And yet although you have been thus honored, you must do your duty, and obey orders, and fight well." Is it objected that men will continue in sin that grace may abound? That objection occurred to Paul. In his own person he was the best answer to the objection—the most ardent believer in election leading the holiest life. But he answered the objection. His reply is in the first half of Romans vi. What does he say? That we must not carry our trust in electing grace too far, and so abuse the doctrine? Not at all. He says that the proposed situation is simply impossible. A man cannot sincerely rest in the doctrine and neglect the duties. Adoption means death unto sin, and "how shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" In other words he meets the objection by stating negatively what he so strenuously affirms elsewhere, that the sense of having been chosen of God unto salvation will infallibly prompt the believer to live worthy of his high calling. In this doctrine the minister has an irresistible leverage upon the noblest emotions of his people. With it he may not only incite them to service, but inspire them with confidence in their ability to serve. The conclusion is forced on the

believer, that, if he was chosen to bear fruit, he is able to bear fruit. "I can do all things through Christ."

The tendency of this doctrine to foster true humility would not be so worthy of note, were not humility so elusive and treacherous a virtue. One way in which to aim at it is to abase the pride. This process may only leave a vacuum. Another way is to preach on sins and sinfulness. It is a bold preacher who often discourses directly upon Christian humility. The moment one thinks of it he is apt to lose it. "Few speak of humility humbly," says Pascal. If one cherishes it he may easily fall into morbid and unreal feeling. But the humility which comes of high honors bestowed, the sense of unworthiness which accompanies the wonder and joy of receiving spiritual gifts from God, is so free from the dross of self and withal so grateful, so leavened with bold confidence and so little in danger of excess, that were it only to produce such a virtue we might well preach often upon electing grace. Loyola's motto, "Humbly to conceal humility, and to shun the praise of being humble," has half an eye still open toward the public. Augustine's words have a more genuine ring, "He chooses us, not because we believe, but that we may believe; lest we should say that we first chose him." Paul exhibits the direct influence of the doctrine upon himself when, in discussing it, he exclaims, "Unto me, who am the least of all saints, is this grace given." John's humility is as marked as his wonder and joy when he cries, "Behold, what manner of love." But our Lord himself gives us the best object lesson on this point. He has just called his disciples "friends," and has assured them that to them he has made known the secrets of heaven. But it is for just these favors that they have been contending. He sees their rising pride. He must make them humble, and yet not undo the inspiring effect of his words just spoken. And so he adds, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you." He leaves them all the honor, but takes away their

boasting. He so presents the honor that humility blends with their gratitude. This effect will follow its cause in any believing soul. If the preacher sets before his hearers the glory of their high calling in Christ, it will hardly be necessary for him to exhort at the close, "put on, therefore, as the elect of God, humbleness of mind." What believer, contemplating the grace which has reached down and saved him in his guilt, can be anything but humble? Yet his is not the humility of despair. It is a joyous, grateful humility, a virile Christian virtue, emptied of self because filled with Christ.

That the presentation of this doctrine from the pulpit will greatly exalt God in the minds of his people is manifest. Paul says that God chooses us "to the praise of the glory of his grace." Our thoughts dwell upon the infinite love and condescension of electing grace, and we gain sublime conceptions of the divine nature. "Lord, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory. And he caused all his goodness to pass before him." All miracles are primarily for the glory of God. John says of the first miracle of Christ, that by it Jesus "manifested forth his glory." Luther rightly declares that the spiritual miracles are greatest. The conversion of a soul is a mightier work than the raising of Lazarus. Let the believer be taught to view his salvation as a spiritual miracle wrought by God for his own glory. Much of the piety of our day lacks depth, because the work of human redemption is regarded as having for its chief end the happiness of the redeemed. But it is a divine undertaking for the glory of God. "I do not this for your sakes, O house of Israel, but for mine holy name's sake." The believer will lose nothing of the joy of salvation, if he thinks of his personal election as one harmonious note in the great anthem of praise which fills heaven with melody, ascribing "salvation to our God, which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb." Why did God choose me? "That he might make known the

riches of his glory." It is good for me to contemplate that glory as the chief end of God's choice. Then my life is being so ordered as to conduce to the glory of God. My eternal happiness will be secured, but that, too, will glorify God. If any one is disturbed lest God may be made too exclusively a sovereign, his contention is with the Bible. No believer can be injured by taking into his faith as much sovereignty of God as is set forth in the Scriptures. And it is salutary for Christian piety to appropriate as much as possible of the grace which is distinctively sovereign. The conception of grace as a sort of friendly ally coming in to reinforce human strength when that is not quite equal to its labor is responsible for untold despondency and failure in Christian living. Exalt God. Preach every truth that deepens the believer's sense of utter dependence upon the divine arm. Tell men that the very entrance of a soul into the Father's family is wholly the work of grace. This does not put God far from his world on a distant throne. It brings God into his world. Its alpha and its omega is "Christ in you." It enthrones God high in the love and reverence of his people, and moves each one of them to live "to the praise of his glory," striving earnestly all the time to "make his calling and election sure," yet confessing every step of the way, "By the grace of God I am what I am."

A vivid sense of having been chosen of God, possessing the hearts of Christ's disciples, binds them together. If the pastor would promote Christian fellowship and unity, he will preach on this subject. It is a theme for the service preparatory to communion. It is "the tie that binds." Its presentation will tend to keep a church harmonious among themselves. Dr. Emmons said that he prevented church quarrels by keeping his people interested in the great doctrines. None so good for this purpose as the doctrine that all disciples are made members of Christ's body by a sovereign act of God's will. Napoleon's Old Guard owed much

of their *esprit de corps* to the consciousness that they were picked men. Paul was fitted to be the apostle to the Gentiles, because he recognized in every man elected of God a brother in Christ. Peter beholds "strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia," but immediately gathers them all into one family as "elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father." The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews addresses them as "holy brethren," because they are common "partakers of the heavenly calling." The mention of God's electing grace often seems to suggest to the mind of the inspired writer the thought of Christian unity. Christ himself justifies this conjunction of ideas. In his sacramental prayer our Lord brings together divine election and Christian unity in a single petition, "Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are." This is the true bond. It is to be secured by faithful preaching of our common adoption into God's family. Church congresses may express Christian unity; they cannot create it. Through participation in the essential truths and experiences of Christianity, believers are to be made one. It is the peculiarity of conventions and organizations for promoting Christian unity, that they are of service only after such unity has already been realized in the spiritual life of God's people. Unity must come through life, and life must be grounded in truth. The fact that believers are one from the beginning, through no act or effort of their own, but because the seal of God's electing grace is upon them, one and all, appears at once to every mind when the doctrine of election is adequately presented. Here is a great missionary incentive. Here is the sheet let down from heaven. "And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold." The London conference of missions a few years since was one of the fruits from this seed. Wherever I wander among the mission fields of whatever Christian name, and meet a man who has

been chosen by my Father and adopted into his family, that man is my brother. We are already one in Christ. Not because we have agreed to some scheme of unity, but because of God's act in choosing us. If we repudiate the relationship, we sin against the grace which first called us. If we fail to recognize the bond, it still exists. If we greet each other as brothers, we do not originate the relationship, but only recognize what God created before the foundation of the world. A profound and grateful consciousness of my own election by God is one of the surest guarantees that I will love every other member of the race similarly chosen. To preach this doctrine is therefore to promote that unity for which Christ prayed.

Much more might be written upon this theme, especially as to the salutary impressions to be made upon the unconverted by a tender presentation of the love and mercy of God in his electing grace. It may be objected that the natural heart will not take kindly to this doctrine. The same may be said of all the distinctive truths of the redemptive system. We greatly overestimate the evils of opposition to the truth, and are sometimes sinfully timid in risking such opposition. Many a conversion dates its beginning from the first resistance of the soul to the truth. "No man thoroughly understands a truth until he has contended against it." The convert will accept all the more joyously, and hold all the more tenaciously, the gospel which he has withstood. Kicking against the pricks has its subsequent benefits. Thus the man of wrath is made to praise God. But we contend that this doctrine, lovingly proclaimed, will often be used by the Spirit for the conversion of souls. If it be dashed against a congregation, like the irresistible wave upon the immovable rock, no good result will follow. But, rightly expounded, it reveals and honors God, and must therefore do good. All the effects enumerated above may

be produced upon unbelievers under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

If we were writing an article to show the harmony of Paul's teachings with those of Christ, we should cite this doctrine as a luminous illustration. After all that has been said about returning from the elaborate theology of the Epistles to the simple utterances of the Gospels, it may fairly be asked whether the apostle to the Gentiles anywhere uncovers an important doctrine which is not somewhere embedded in the sayings of his Master. Surely the man who assured his brethren at Ephesus that God "hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love," did not in that particular refine very greatly upon the doctrine of Him who said to his disciples, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain."