

**THE SOVEREIGNTY
OF GOD
IN SALVATION**

*The teaching of Article XVII
of the Church of England*

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The Sovereignty of God in Salvation – *the teaching of Article XVII*

We are astonished that many who profess to approve of the Articles of the Church of England, should be so averse to hear the smallest mention made of the counsels and decrees of God. we must not ... be afraid of speaking as the Scripture speaks. God did most assuredly know from all eternity who were, or should be, his: and he did “choose them in Christ before the foundation of the world,” and “predestinate them to the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself;” and “he gave them to Christ,” to be redeemed by his blood, to be saved by his grace, and to be made heirs of his glory: yea, he “wrote their names in the Lamb’s book of life before the foundation of the world.” How truly blessed then must they be!¹

This was Charles Simeon’s comment in a sermon on Isaiah 61: 9 (“all that see them shall acknowledge them, that they are the seed which the LORD hath blessed”).

Article XVII, Of Predestination and Election, deals with a deep and mysterious doctrine, touching on the sovereignty of God and his initiative in salvation, and its purpose and its effects. The terms ‘predestination’ and ‘election’ are often used virtually as synonyms, though predestination is more widely used of God’s foreknowledge of all things, not particularly of his foreknowledge of human salvation, whereas election is used more precisely of God’s choosing members of the human race to salvation in Christ (as in Ephesians 1: 4 – ‘he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world’). It is noteworthy that Article XVII is by far the longest of the Articles – it deals with a subject that must be carefully defined and that has broad implications.

¹ C. Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, VIII (1833), 564

God's everlasting purpose to save those whom he has chosen in Christ

The first sentence of the Article deals with God's everlasting purpose:

Predestination to life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid), He hath constantly decreed by His counsel, secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom He hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honour.

The Article makes it plain that it is dealing with predestination to life, the salvation of those whom God has chosen to save in Christ; it does not deal with the lost, those unrepentant sinners whose refusal of God's call to all men everywhere to repent will result in a lost eternity. God's purpose and choice are placed before the foundations of the world were laid, in accordance with the frequent teaching of Scripture, e.g. "Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25: 34).

When the Article states that He hath constantly decreed, the word 'constantly' is not intended in the modern colloquial sense of 'continually recurring', but means 'with constancy', 'steadfastly', 'unchangeably', and is in complete harmony with the earlier phrase 'the everlasting purpose of God'.

The divine initiative is strongly implied by the words that are used: election is God's 'everlasting purpose'; by him it has been 'constantly decreed'; it is the outworking of 'His counsel'. There is nothing of God's foreseeing any quality in man that might invite redemption; the salvation of those whom God chooses to save is the free and unfettered choice of God. 'So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy'. (Romans 9: 16)

We are then told that His counsel is "secret to us"; the Latin version of the Articles, which is of equal authority, has the word 'indeed' (*quidem*) added to this phrase and qualifying 'us' (*nobis*) – God's

counsel is to us indeed secret or hidden. This important principle is found many times in Scripture:

The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever (Deuteronomy 29: 29)

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! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? (Romans 11: 33-34)²

Most importantly, the Article stresses that election is ‘in Christ’. God will deliver from curse and damnation those ‘whom He hath chosen in Christ out of mankind’, and he will ‘bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation’. Those who are Christians are ‘in Christ’, and it is through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ that they attain everlasting salvation. Election is not a doctrine of impersonal fatalism; it is about God’s choosing to save men and women in Christ.

The progress of the elect in Christ from damnation to salvation

The second sentence of Article XVII traces the seven stages of the progress of the elect from “curse and damnation” to “everlasting salvation”:

Wherefore they which be endued with so excellent a benefit of God be called according to God’s purpose by His Spirit working in due season: they through grace obey the calling: they be justified freely: they be made sons of God by adoption: they be made like the image of His only-begotten Son Jesus Christ: they walk religiously in good works: and, at length, by God’s mercy, they attain to everlasting felicity.

The sequence begins with the elect being called according to God’s purpose: this call is not a general call which may be accepted or

² Cf. also Job 33: 13; Ephesians 1: 9

rejected, but an effectual call, and the elect by grace respond to that call. Dr. Packer described it:

It is the operation whereby God causes sinners to understand and respond to the gospel invitation. It is a calling that creates the response which it seeks, and confers the blessing to which it invites.³

The free justification of the elect follows, and they are adopted as God's sons. A Christ-like character is formed within them, and this finds its outward expression in a life of good works; ultimately it issues in everlasting felicity. The passage in the Article is reminiscent of the sequence of St. Paul's argument in Romans 8:

For whom he did foreknow, 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.⁴

Those stages in the Articles' chain which are not referred to in this passage are taught in other passages of Scripture.⁵

D.B. Knox commented on this second sentence of the Article:

We note here the two-sidedness of grace: God's sovereign initiative works through the faculties of our nature. God calls, we respond; God justifies, adopts, sanctifies, we live out a Christian life and finally attain to everlasting felicity. But our response is not to be regarded as our own contribution to our salvation but is itself God's gift, "They through grace obey", "At length, by God's mercy, they attain."⁶

³ J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (1961), 113-114

⁴ Romans 8: 29-30

⁵ Cf. 2 Timothy 1:9; Ephesians 1: 5; Ephesians 2: 10

⁶ David Broughton Knox, *Thirty-nine Articles* (London, 1967), 30; D. Broughton Knox, *Selected Works*, II, (Sydney, 2003), 128-129

We may know our election in Christ; the benefits that brings

The first half of the sentence which comprises the second paragraph affirms that we may know our election in Christ and outlines the benefits that knowledge brings:

the godly consideration of Predestination and our Election in Christ is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons, and such as feel in themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ, mortifying the works of the flesh and their earthly members, and drawing up their mind to high and heavenly things, as well because it doth greatly establish and confirm their faith of eternal Salvation to be enjoyed through Christ, as because it doth fervently kindle their love towards God:

The Article teaches implicitly that we may know our election in Christ: we may consider it, be comforted by it, observe the working of the Spirit in ourselves by reason of it, have our faith established and confirmed by it and our love towards God kindled through it; we must, therefore, already know of our election in Christ.

We may know of our election in Christ through the promises of God, recorded in Scripture: these were referred to in the first paragraph. We are called according to God's purpose by His Spirit working in due season, and through grace we obey the calling: we hear the promises of God as the Holy Spirit speaks through the written Word, and by grace we are enabled to accept them and believe them. The last paragraph of the Article, which we shall examine more closely in due course, speaks of our receiving God's promises as they are set forth to us in Holy Scripture. Secondly, we know of our election in Christ through our perception of the working of God's Spirit within us: we can see that the Spirit is at work in us, mortifying the works of the flesh and of our earthly members, however imperfectly because of our abiding sinful nature; drawing up our mind to high and heavenly things; and kindling love towards God. As we observe God at work, we may say:

The work which His goodness began,
The arm of His strength will complete

There have been many in the Christian era who have rejected the doctrine of election, or rejected the belief that a man may know of his election.⁷ This has often been intertwined with acceptance or rejection of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. The Council of Trent, for example, taught that “except by a special revelation, it cannot be known whom God has chosen unto Himself”.⁸ Article XVII teaches that through the promises of Scripture and observing the workings of the Spirit of God a man may know that he is of the elect.

This knowledge is not speculative, but practical: “the godly consideration of Predestination and our Election in Christ is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort” to those who are truly godly – the Latin version adds ‘truly’ (*vere*) in front of ‘godly’ (*piis*), ‘to truly godly persons’. When we recognise in ourselves the Spirit of God at work, mortifying the works of the flesh, drawing up our mind to heavenly things, and kindling our love to God, we are encouraged, strengthened, and comforted as Christians: if God is at work in us, he is acting towards us as towards one of his elect in Christ. The effect of a knowledge of election has often been caricatured as leading, indeed inevitably leading, to spiritual complacency and carelessness; but in fact it leads, and inevitably leads, to a fervent kindling of love towards God, and a continuing and greater desire to mortify the works of the flesh and set our mind on heavenly things. Knox wrote:

we may know that we are within the unbroken chain of God’s purposes of blessing leading to eternal felicity. This knowledge yields not only “comfort” but increase in active godliness. For love kindles love, and a knowledge of God’s steadfast love in delivering us from the curse and damnation we deserve and leading us to “eternal salvation to be enjoyed through Christ”, fervently kindles love towards God.⁹

As the godly consider predestination and their election in Christ, “it

⁷ “I do not say that to hold Election is absolutely necessary to salvation, though to be one of God’s Elect undoubtedly is necessary.” J.C. Ryle, *Old Paths* (1877), 466; Banner of Truth edition (2013), 437

⁸ Session VI, chapter 12; T.A. Buckley, *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (1851), 38

⁹ Knox, *Thirty-nine Articles*, 31; Knox, *Selected Works*, II, 129

doth greatly establish and confirm their faith of eternal Salvation to be enjoyed through Christ”: the Article is here touching on the indefectibility and perseverance of the saints, and the assurance of security in Christ that the knowledge of our election in Christ brings. Knowledge of our election in Christ strengthens our confidence in the eternal salvation that we enjoy through Christ: he who has begun a good work in us will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. Knox commented:

A perception of the working of the Spirit of Christ in us is the assurance that God has adopted us as sons and chosen us in Christ; ... The Article, recognizing this, affirms that the doctrine of predestination is a doctrine for the believer.¹⁰

Cautions against deductions about election that are not regulated by Scripture

The Article proceeds to consider the danger of a misuse of the doctrine of predestination by those who lack the Spirit of Christ:

So for curious and carnal persons, lacking the Spirit of Christ, to have continually before their eyes the sentence of God’s Predestination, is a most dangerous downfall, whereby the Devil doth thrust them either into desperation, or into wretchedness of most unclean living, no less perilous than desperation.

We must not despair of God’s promises, arguing that we are not elect. As Knox commented,

A perception of the working of the Spirit of Christ in us is the assurance that God has adopted us as sons and chosen us in Christ; but an absence of this Spirit is no sign that a man is not elect (for all the elect began in this state!). Nevertheless it may be so construed by the spiritually unenlightened, as experience shows.¹¹

¹⁰ Knox, *Thirty-nine Articles*, 31; Knox, *Selected Works*, II, 129-130

¹¹ Knox, *Thirty-nine Articles*, 31; Knox, *Selected Works*, II, 129-130

If people despair because they believe that they are not elect (and argue that therefore it does not matter how they live), they are misapplying the doctrine of predestination and election unto life. They need to be pointed to the great invitations and promises of the Gospel, which are addressed to all: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”¹² “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him, should not perish, but have everlasting life.”¹³ No man may know that he is not of the elect.¹⁴

Others have perverted the doctrine to justify carelessness about sin, arguing that, since they are elect and will infallibly be saved, it does not matter how they live. This is parallel to the argument that St. Paul dismisses in Romans 6: “Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?”¹⁵

The Article speaks of “wretchlessness of unclean living”; ‘wretchlessness’ would be rendered ‘recklessness’ in modern English. It is used to translate the Latin *securitatem*, which denotes a freedom from care or anxiety, here in the negative sense of ‘carelessness’. Presumption about election may lead a man to be careless about sin, which is a perilous (*perniciosam*) state;¹⁶ but we must not “presume on

¹² Matthew 11: 28

¹³ John 3: 16

¹⁴ Cf. A.A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival*, II (1980), 560

¹⁵ Romans 6: 1-2

¹⁶ This teaching of the Article was given in a more extended form in the document entitled “Reformation of the Ecclesiastical Laws” (*Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum*). During the reign of King Edward VI a body of ecclesiastical law was formulated, though because of the King’s death in 1553 it was never formally enacted; but it illuminates the text of the Article. It comments on many who live in a wild and dissolute way, ... when they get interested in the subject, being dissipated by excess and completely cut off from the Spirit of Christ, always toss predestination and rejection, or (as they usually call it) reprobation, into their speech, arguing that since God by his eternal counsel has already determined something, both concerning salvation and concerning destruction, they have some excuse for their wrongdoings and crimes and all manner of evil. ... under the devil’s leadership, they are either tossed headlong into actual despair or drawn into some dissolute and soft

our election to the neglect of the clearly revealed will of God as to our duty and the way we live our lives.”¹⁷ George Whitefield wrote: the doctrine of election “has a natural tendency to rouse the soul out of its carnal security.”¹⁸

The authority and sufficiency of Holy Scripture

The Article ends by enunciating some important principles, showing how our understanding of predestination and election must be governed by Scripture:

Furthermore, we must receive God’s promises in such wise, as they be generally set forth to us in Holy Scripture; and, in our doings, that Will of God is to be followed, which we have expressly declared unto us in the Word of God.

We must receive God’s promises “as they be generally set forth”; the original meaning of the word ‘generally’ has become obsolete, and it is now used to mean ‘commonly’, or ‘as a general rule’; but the earlier meaning is the one in use here – ‘universally’, or ‘with respect to all’.¹⁹

(1) We shall be content to follow that Will of God which is declared unto us in the Word of God, because we know that the Word of God is sufficient, that it reveals to us all we need to know. The restless human spirit often stumbles, because it wants to know more than has been revealed, and the doctrine of election leaves many questions in the mind of man as to why God has chosen some and not chosen others; but to us indeed his counsel is secret. Any attempt to go beyond Scripture, to extrapolate from Scripture into what has not been revealed, is to be eschewed: it would be a rebellious rejection of the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. “That Will of God is to be followed, which

carelessness of life, without either repentance or any consciousness of wrongdoing. Which two evils appear to have a different nature, but the same end result. [G.L. Bray, *Tudor Church Reform* (2000), 211; translation of *securitatem* changed to ‘carelessness’.]

¹⁷ Knox, *Thirty-nine Articles*, 32; Knox, *Selected Works*, II, 130

¹⁸ Dallimore, 560

¹⁹ Cf. T.P. Boulton, *An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles* (1884), 140-141

we have expressly declared unto us in the Word of God.” We know by faith that God’s ways are perfect: we own God’s justice, in George Whitefield’s words, “in imputing Adam’s sin to his posterity; and also, that after Adam fell, and his posterity in him, God might justly have passed them all by, without sending his own Son to be a saviour for any one.”²⁰

(2) As the doctrine of predestination and election is revealed to us in Scripture, we shall consider it carefully and seek to derive the ‘sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort’ that it provides. As God in his perfect and infinite wisdom has revealed this truth to us, it must not be neglected or left aside, as though it were an embarrassing revelation that would better not have been made. It is to be considered carefully: it offers immense comfort to the Christian in assuring him that God who has begun a good work in him will bring it to completion in the day of Jesus Christ.

(3) We must receive God’s promises and invitations as they are made universally to all men in Scripture. The Lord Jesus Christ says to all: “him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out”.²¹ “If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink.”²² “Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.”²³

We shall proclaim the Gospel with confidence, because we know that God according to his purpose is working by his Spirit in due season, calling those whom he has chosen in Christ, and that they through grace obey that calling:

So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.²⁴

²⁰ Dallimore, II, 564

²¹ John 6: 37

²² John 7: 37

²³ Revelation 22: 17

²⁴ Isaiah 55: 11

The position of the Article of Predestination and Election in the sequence of Articles on Salvation

It is noteworthy that the Article of Predestination and Election is placed last in the series of Articles which deals with the sequence of Salvation (Of Original or Birth-sin, Of Free-Will, Of the Justification of Man, Of Good Works, Of Predestination and Election), even though election is logically first, as it occurred “before the foundations of the world were laid”. John Bradford, the Marian martyr, wrote:

Thus do I wade in predestination, in such sort as God hath ... opened it. Though in God it be the first, yet to us it is last opened: and therefore I begin with creation, from thence I come to redemption, so to justification, and so to election.²⁵

A man must begin with the first elements of Christianity, repentance towards God, and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ, and so work his way towards Election. As J.C. Ryle wrote:

Let him not waste his time by beginning with enquiries about his own Election. Let him rather attend first to the plain marks of an Elect man, and never rest till these marks are his own. Let him break off from all known sin, and flee to Christ for pardon, peace, mercy, and grace. Let him cry mightily to God in prayer, and give the Lord no rest till he feels within him the real witness of the Spirit. He that begins in this fashion will thank God one day for His electing grace, in eternity if not in time.²⁶

In a letter from prison to two men who were disputing about God’s election, John Bradford wrote: “If you feel not this [justifying and regenerating] faith, then know that predestination is too high a matter for you to be disputers of it, until you have been better scholars in the school-house of repentance and justification, which is the grammar-school, wherein we must be conversant and learned, before we go to the university of God’s most holy predestination and providence.”²⁷

²⁵ A, Townsend (ed.), *Writings of John Bradford*, II, (1853), 134

²⁶ Ryle, *Old Paths*, 473; 2013 edition, 443

²⁷ Bradford, II, 134

The position of Article XVII in the series of Articles about Salvation is intentional, and reflects the fact that in Christian experience the doctrine of Election is learned after a person has come to Christ in faith and repentance – after he has been “called according to God’s purpose by His Spirit working in due season”, and after he has “through grace obeyed the calling”.

Unanimity of the Reformers

There was a unity of doctrine among the Reformed Churches, and this unity was seen in their all holding to a doctrine of predestination and election; and Luther also taught this. It was not till late in the sixteenth century that some contrary teaching was heard: in England some teachers at Cambridge denied the doctrine, but these were for the while isolated instances. All the Archbishops of Canterbury from Cranmer to George Abbott, who died in 1633, accepted this teaching;²⁸ William Laud, appointed in 1633, was the first archbishop to move away from the doctrines of grace. More broadly the beginnings of Arminianism were late in the sixteenth century, and they led to the holding of the Synod of Dort in 1618.²⁹

²⁸ “It is an acknowledged fact, that the first five Archbishops of Canterbury – Cranmer, Parker, Grindal, Whitgift, and Abbott – were decidedly Calvinistic in sentiment, and discouraged all kind of teaching which was opposed to the Calvinistic school.” J.C. Ryle, *The Bishop, the Pastor, and the Preacher* (1854), 31. Ryle omitted Richard Bancroft.

²⁹ Among the English Reformers there is frequent reference to election, but only a few of them wrote specifically on the subject:

John Bradford, the martyr, wrote two brief treatises, one *A Treatise of Election and Free-will*, the other *A Defence of Election* [A. Townsend (ed.), *Writings of John Bradford*, I (1848), 211-220; 305-330].

John Foxe, having recorded the life and martyrdom of Bradford, set down some brief ‘Notes’ on the subject [John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments* (nineteenth-century editions), VII, 268-274]; and in completing the work of Walter Haddon against Jerome Osorius, bishop of Selves in Portugal, he wrote an extensive section on election [L. Richmond (ed.), *The Fathers of the English Church*, VIII (1812), 455-459, 577-750].

James Pilkington wrote a Latin treatise on predestination, expounding the verse in Romans ‘God hath mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth’ [Romans 9: 18; J. Scholefield (ed.), *Works of James Pilkington* (1842), 673-678].

What of the lost?

The Article deals with predestination to life and does not discuss the relation of the will of God to the lost. John Hooper, bishop of Gloucester and Worcester, dealt with the subject of the lost, designating sin as the immediate cause of damnation:

The cause of rejection or damnation is sin in man, which will not hear, neither receive the promise of the gospel This sentence is true, howsoever man judge of predestination: God is not the cause of sin, nor would not have man to sin.³⁰

John Bradford wrote that the lost “have cause to lament their own wilfulness, sin, and contemning of Christ, which is the cause of their reprobation”.³¹

Scripture makes it plain that man is morally responsible, and that, if he is lost, it is because of his sin and his rejection of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who said: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, ... how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!”³² The antinomy of divine sovereignty and human responsibility is expressed in certain passages: “truly the Son of man goeth, as it was determined: but woe unto that man by whom he is betrayed!”³³ Jesus of Nazareth, “being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain”.³⁴

It is likely that the majority of the English Reformers were believers in preterition – that the lost were those whom God had passed over.³⁵

William Tyndale, in particular, made frequent reference to election in his works.

³⁰ S. Carr (ed.), *Early Writings of John Hooper* (1843), 264

³¹ Bradford, I, 219

³² Matthew 23: 37

³³ Luke 22: 22

³⁴ Acts 2: 23

³⁵ Cf. “The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby He extendeth or withholdeth mercy, as He pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over His creatures, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath, for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice.” *The [Westminster] Confession of Faith*, 3, 7.

James Pilkington, later bishop of Durham, in his Latin tract, argued from Romans 9: 18 that God might do what he would with his own, and that it was human temerity to dislike speaking of God's hardening men. Later in the sixteenth century the Lambeth Articles, approved by Archbishop Whitgift, taught a doctrine of reprobation: the first article read – "God from eternity has predestinated some to life, and some He has reprobated to death".³⁶ Though the teaching of the Reformers with regard to the lost may have varied, the emphasis of their teaching was clear – predestination to life.

St. Paul notices the complaint that there is a contradiction or inconsistency in the antinomy of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility: "Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?"³⁷ Dr. Packer commented:

If, as our Lord, God orders all our actions, how can it be reasonable or right for Him to act also as our Judge, and condemn our shortcomings? Observe how Paul replies. He does not attempt to demonstrate the propriety of God's action; instead, he rebukes the spirit of the question. 'Nay, but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?' What the objector has to learn is that he, a creature and a sinner, has no right whatsoever to find fault with the revealed ways of God.³⁸

The Reformers taught the scriptural doctrine that God's counsel is secret to us. Thus Tyndale wrote:

Why doth God open one man's eyes and not another's? Paul (Rom. ix.) forbiddeth to ask why; for it is too deep for man's capacity. God we see is honoured thereby, and his mercy is set out and the more seen in the vessels of mercy.³⁹

And in another place:

³⁶ J. Ayre (ed.), *Works of John Whitgift*, III (1853), 612; C. Neil and J.M. Willoughby, *The Tutorial Prayer Book* (1912), xxi-xxii

³⁷ Romans 9: 19

³⁸ Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, 23

³⁹ H. Walter (ed.), *Tyndale's Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue [III]* (1850), 191

God will be feared, and not have his secret judgements known. Moreover we by the light of faith see a thousand things which are impossible to an infidel to see: so likewise, no doubt, in the light of the clear vision of God we shall see things which now God will not have known. ... Let us therefore give diligence rather to do the will of God, than to search his secrets, which are not profitable for us to know.⁴⁰

Knox gave a balanced and judicious assessment of Article XVII:

The Article confines itself to discussing “Predestination to Life”. It does not touch on reprobation (or preterition). This omission is not necessarily a denial of reprobation, as is sometimes assumed, but a recognition of the overwhelming predominance of the doctrine of predestination to life in the treatment of the subject in the Scripture, compared with the mystery of reprobation which is only touched on in half a dozen passages in Scripture. Predestination to life is a constant topic of Scripture, and consequently appropriately finds a prominent place in our own Articles.⁴¹

The abiding relevance and value of the Scriptural and Reformation doctrine of Election

The doctrine of predestination to life has been revealed to us in Scripture; its truth and its usefulness to believers are demonstrated in Article XVII. Inasmuch as it has been taught in Scripture, we know that it has a benefit for us who are believers, for “whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.”⁴² We turn now to consider some facets of the doctrine which are of abiding value and relevance.

⁴⁰ H. Walter (ed.), *Tyndale's Doctrinal Treatises* [I] (1848), 89

⁴¹ Knox, *Thirty-nine Articles*, 32; Knox, *Select Works*, II, 130

⁴² Romans 15: 4

The sovereignty of grace

“In the Thirty-Nine Articles the doctrine of election is fundamental to the sovereignty of grace.”⁴³ Grace in salvation is grace – the free and undeserved favour of God – because of election. If the cause of salvation were outside God, then grace would cease to be grace in its Biblical sense. William Tyndale took exception to Sir Thomas More’s suggestion that “God remitteth not the sin of his chosen people, because that he hath chosen them; nor of his mercy; but for a towardness that is more in one than in another.” Tyndale took his stand on the scriptural teaching: “It is not therefore, as Paul saith, of the running or willing, but of the mercy of God, that a man is called and chosen to grace.”

When Erasmus asserted the freedom of the human will to turn to God, and Luther replied in his *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther thanked Erasmus for getting to grips with the basic issue⁴⁴ and the ground of his gospel. Erasmus taught that man was not totally incapable of meritorious action (Sir Thomas More’s ‘towardness’), which makes him a fit subject for God’s gift of internal grace (the term grace being used here, as often in unreformed theology, for a supernatural spiritual energy). This meritorious action was called congruent merit; it is rejected by Article XIII, which states:

Works done before the grace of Christ, and the Inspiration of his Spirit, are not pleasant to God, ... neither do they make men meet to receive grace, or (as the School-authors say) deserve grace of congruity.

Congruent merit was said to draw forth grace from God, and led to works which God was bound to reward with further supplies of grace. This teaching made the salvation of man due to his own action: man took the initiative and God responded. At root it was Pelagian.⁴⁵

The doctrine of election was a concomitant of the doctrine of original sin and the sinfulness of man; it was a vital part of the Reformation

⁴³ Knox, *Thirty-nine Articles*, 128; Knox, *Select Works*, II, 128

⁴⁴ *ipsum iugulum petisti*: J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston, *Martin Luther on the Bondage of the Will*, (1957), 319

⁴⁵ Cf. the much fuller discussion at Packer and Johnston, *op. cit.*, 48-49

theology of salvation. Man does not initiate action in salvation. God is the source by his sovereign and free election: as the Article states:

they which be endued with so excellent a benefit of God be called according to God's purpose by His Spirit working in due season: they through grace obey the calling:

Justification is by grace alone through faith alone; and its source and origin is God's election. Election is the guardian of the doctrine of justification – any doctrine except justification by grace alone through faith alone is incompatible with it.

Faith is not a good work or a means of earning God's favour; it is the gift of God to the elect. Tyndale wrote:

the right faith springeth not of man's fantasy, neither is it in any man's power to obtain it; but it is altogether the pure gift of God poured into us freely, without all manner doing of us, without deserving and merits, yea, and without seeking for of us; and is (as saith Paul in the second to the Ephesians) even God's gift and grace, purchased through Christ.⁴⁶

If we do not recognise the full extent of the sinfulness of our fallen nature (known to theologians as total depravity) and of our powerlessness to turn to God, as those who are dead in trespasses and sins, our understanding of God and of salvation will be confused. We shall fail to give God the honour that is his due; and we shall experience uncertainty and hesitancy about salvation, if we think that ultimately it depends on our initiative and our tenacity.

Assurance

“The godly consideration of Predestination and our Election in Christ ... doth greatly establish and confirm their faith of eternal Salvation to be enjoyed through Christ”. This doctrine brings security and assurance to the Christian believer. The Reformers saw this clearly;

⁴⁶ Tyndale's *Doctrinal Treatises* [I], 53

thus John Jewel, bishop of Salisbury, wrote, commenting on 1 Thessalonians 5: 24 (“Faithful is he which calleth you, which also will do it”):

He hath begun a good work in you, he will finish it. He will lead you from virtue to virtue, from strength to strength, from glory to glory. He hath called you, he will also keep you faithful until the day of the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ. You are Christ’s sheep. No man shall take you out of his hands. He hath not lost one of all them whom his Father had given him.⁴⁷

Compare this with the teaching of the Council of Trent:

No one, moreover, so long as he exists in this mortal state, ought so far to presume concerning the secret mystery of divine predestination, as to determine for certain that he is assuredly in the number of the predestinated⁴⁸

No certainty, no security, no assurance. This is the outworking of the Roman system and is the logical consequence of a salvation that depends on works – man and his works are uncertain, so man’s salvation is uncertain. But Scripture says: “the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his.”⁴⁹

What encouragement it is for the Christian in the difficulties, temptations, struggles, disappointments, and sadnesses of this world to know that, by grace, he is secure in Christ, and that God will bring him by Christ to everlasting salvation, as a vessel made to honour! There is no arrogance or presumption in such a position: it is a simple trust in God’s promises, a looking away from any dependency on oneself, and an entire dependence on his faithfulness, who will complete the work that he has begun. Thus Charles Simeon wrote of the doctrines of predestination and election:

⁴⁷ J. Ayre (ed.), *Works of John Jewel*, II (1847), 885

⁴⁸ Session VI, chapter 12; T.A. Buckley, *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (1851), 38

⁴⁹ 2 Timothy 2: 19

They lead us to refer every mercy to God, as “the Author,” and to look to him for the continuance of it, as “the Finisher,” of our salvation. A just view of these doctrines ... shews us, that, in the whole work of man’s salvation, the creature is nothing, and God is ALL: it furnishes us with a consolation which nothing can destroy, and with a strength which nothing can overcome. In a word, it is “an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast.”⁵⁰

Knox wrote:

The Christian should always view the doctrine of predestination from the standpoint of his position in Christ. Looking backward he sees God’s eternal grace choosing him in Christ, calling him, adopting him, glorifying him. As he looks forward he rejoices in the sure hope of salvation, for God is faithful, who called him and will confirm him to the end (1 Cor. 1: 8; Phil. 1: 6; 1 Thess. 5: 24).⁵¹

J.C. Ryle gave clear advice as to assurance that derives from election:

Listen not for a moment to those who tell you that in this life we can never be sure of our own spiritual state, and must always be in doubt. The Roman Catholics say so. The ignorant world says so. The devil says so. But the Bible says nothing of the kind. There is such a thing as strong *assurance* of our acceptance in Christ, and a Christian should never rest till he has obtained it. That a man may be saved without this strong assurance I do not deny. But that without it he misses a great privilege, and much comfort, I am quite sure.⁵²

Good works

The Article lays it down that one of the results of election in Christ will be that the elect “walk religiously in good works”; they feel the

⁵⁰ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, XIX, 261; sermon on The Christian’s Anchor (Hebrews 6: 19-20)

⁵¹ Knox, *Thirty-nine Articles*, 31-32; Knox, *Selected Works*, II, 130

⁵² Ryle, *Old Paths*, 475; 2013 edition, 444-445

working of the Spirit of Christ in them, mortifying “the works of the flesh and their earthly members, and drawing up their mind to high and heavenly things”; it will also fervently kindle “their love towards God”, and the Apostle John has told us that “this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments”.⁵³ Knowledge of election does not lead to spiritual complacency or carelessness about holiness; but rather it proves to be a spur to seek to glorify our saving God and to obey his commandments. “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”⁵⁴

This was the teaching of the Reformers. Archbishop Edwin Sandys demonstrated that election will lead men to a greater desire for holiness:

Holiness is the end of our election: “He chose us before the foundations of the world, that we might be holy.” Unto this we are called: “For God did not call us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness.” So that, unless we esteem vilely of our own election, ... we must be holy.⁵⁵

Thomas Cranmer was employing a favourite argument of the Reformers, when he wrote at the end of the Homily of Faith:

Christ himself speaketh of this matter, and saith: “The tree is known by the fruit.” Therefore let us do good works, and thereby declare our faith to be the lively Christian faith. Let us by such virtues as ought to spring out of faith shew our election to be sure and stable, as St. Peter teacheth: “Endeavour yourselves to make your calling and election certain by good works.”⁵⁶

Because of our sinful tendency to put confidence in our own supposed righteousness and the supposed merits of our good works, we need constantly to recollect that good works are the fruit, not the cause,

⁵³ 1 John 5: 3

⁵⁴ Ephesians 2: 10

⁵⁵ J. Ayre (ed.), *Sermons of Edwin Sandys* (1842), 190

⁵⁶ J.E. Cox (ed.), *Miscellaneous Writings of Thomas Cranmer* [II] (1846), 140; G.E. Corrie (ed.), *Certain Sermons* [The Homilies] (1850), 42-43

of our salvation. Those who have been chosen in Christ by God and have by grace obeyed his calling will walk religiously in good works; God chose us by his counsel secret to us, not because of any good works done or foreseen; but it is certain that his election will issue in good works in the believer. J.C. Ryle summarised this important matter:

Election can only be *known by its fruits*. The Elect of God can only be discerned from those who are not Elect by their faith and life. We cannot climb up into the secret of God's eternal counsels. We cannot read the book of life. The fruits of the Spirit, seen and manifested in a man's conversation, are the only grounds on which we can ascertain that he is one of God's Elect. Where the marks of God's Elect can be seen, there, and there only, have we warrant for saying "this is one of the Elect."⁵⁷

The invisible church and the visible church

The doctrine of election also has an important bearing on the doctrine of the Church. What is the Church? In Alexander Nowell's *Catechism* there is the answer:

The Church is the body of the Christian commonweal; that is, the universal number and fellowship of all the faithful, whom God through Christ hath before all beginning of time appointed unto everlasting life.⁵⁸

The Church then is defined by election; the elect constitute the abiding church of Christ, the invisible church. The visible church, the outward ecclesiastical organisation visible on earth, is not coterminous with the abiding, invisible church. The visible church is not the only entity to be called a church; indeed, while it is important – as the Reformers recognised – it is merely temporal, whereas the invisible church is eternal. This understanding, that membership of Christ's Church is by God's secret election and not by outward membership of the visible church, has a radical effect on the whole doctrine of the church.

⁵⁷ Ryle, *Old Paths*, 469; 2013 edition, 439

⁵⁸ G.E. Corrie (ed.), *A Catechism by Alexander Nowell* (1853), 172

Article XIX recognises the existence of, and the distinction between, the visible and the invisible church, when it defines the visible church:

The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance⁵⁹

Where these marks are not present, an organisation cannot justly claim to be a true part of the visible church of Christ.

But even so, the visible church contains the wheat and the tares, those whom God hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and those who are lost in their sins: Article XXVI states that "in the visible Church the evil be ever mingled with the good". The visible church may include, of course, those whom God has chosen in Christ out of mankind but whom he has yet to call by His Spirit. When the servants of the man whose enemy sowed tares among his wheat asked whether they should gather up the tares, he told them not to do so "lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest".⁶⁰

The doctrine of election requires us to distinguish the invisible from the visible church. John Philpot, the martyr, differentiated the two churches. The church "is both visible and invisible. The invisible church is of the elect of God only; the visible consists both of good and bad, using all things in faith, according to God's word."⁶¹ Thomas Rogers, who published a commentary on the Articles, discoursed on this subject:

A true saying is it, the Lord and he only knoweth who are his. For to man the church of Christ is partly invisible, and visible partly. The invisible are all the elect, who be or shall be either in heaven triumphing; or on earth fighting against the flesh, the world, and the devil. These as members of the church, are said to be invisible; not because the men be not seen, but for that

⁵⁹ Article XIX

⁶⁰ Matthew 13: 29-30

⁶¹ R. Eden (ed.), *Examinations and Writings of John Philpot* (1842), 136

their faith and conscience to Godward is not perfectly known to us.

The members of the visible church are some of them for God, and some against God; all of them notwithstanding deemed parts of the church, and accounted faithful, so long as they make no manifest and open rebellion against the gospel of Christ.⁶²

Perspectives provided by the distinction between the invisible and visible church

A right understanding of the church, and of the history and present course of the church's affairs, cannot be had without discerning that there is the invisible church of the elect within the visible church. The Roman doctrine of the infallibility of the church has no scriptural authority – the visible church is under the final authority of Scripture; it is of the invisible church that Christ promised that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”.⁶³ The doctrine of election and of the invisible church adds a further perspective: membership of the visible church is an important duty for a Christian; but the one essential is membership of the invisible church – make your calling and election sure.

The Roman doctrine of the sacraments – that they automatically (*ex opere operato*) effect what they signify – is incompatible with the doctrine of election, as well as being incompatible generally with the scriptural teaching on the sacraments: election can never be reconciled with the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, which teaches that baptism automatically effects what it signifies. Baptism is a covenantal sign and effectual pledge which makes the recipient a member of the outward, visible church, but it cannot and does not of itself make him a member of the invisible church. Similarly, in the Lord's Supper, there is no automatic benefit: it is only by faith that we may participate in the benefits of Christ's death in that sacrament. Article XXIX warns us

⁶² J.J.S. Perowne (ed.), *The Catholic Doctrine of the Church of England* by Thomas Rogers (1854), 164-165

⁶³ Matthew 16: 18

that it is possible to participate in the bread and wine, but not participate in the benefits of Christ's death:

The Wicked, and such as be void of a lively faith, although they do carnally and visibly press with their teeth ... the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, yet are they in no wise partakers of Christ

Ecumenism is a sphere in which in practice the visible church is taken to be the only true church, and the task envisaged is the comprehension of all visible churches in a visible union. The doctrine of election and an understanding of the distinction between the visible and invisible church reveal how mistaken and dangerous this activity is. A true unity, not union, will emerge from submission to the final authority of Scripture, when faithful visible churches – those congregations of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance (Article XIX) – recognise each other.

The doctrine of election helps our understanding in the perplexing situation where a professing Christian appears to fall away. This may indicate that the person concerned was never truly converted – St. John speaks of such a situation:

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.⁶⁴

Or this may mark a period of declension from which God will in mercy recall the backslider. As the Article teaches, from Scripture, we may be sure that God will bring to everlasting salvation those whom he has chosen in Christ. We must remember that “walking religiously in good works” is the only outward sign of election and that to us indeed God's counsel is secret.

⁶⁴ 1 John 2: 19

Evangelism

Though it has sometimes been caricatured as a dissuasive from evangelism, the doctrine of election is a spur to evangelism. It is our duty and privilege to proclaim “God’s promises in such wise as they be generally set forth to us in Holy Scripture”: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.”⁶⁵ Our duty is to preach the Gospel to every creature – to invite every person to acknowledge his sin and to trust in Christ’s atonement for reconciliation to God: “To [Jesus Christ] give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins”;⁶⁶ “whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved”.⁶⁷ The results of this commendation of the Gospel are in God’s hands, not ours: but we know, from the doctrine of election, that there will be those “called according to God’s purpose by His Spirit working in due season”. Without that confidence, we could have no hope of any success in evangelism, for what power have we to make dead bones live, to give life to those who are dead in trespasses and sins? The doctrine of election promises that the word preached will not be without fruit: “be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.”⁶⁸

The pressure to produce ‘results’ has often led to unhappy consequences in evangelism – a wrong attitude to supposed evangelistic methods, a striving on the part of some to force others into the kingdom. The doctrine of election provides the necessary corrective to these man-centred attitudes: we are to be instant, in season and out of season; our responsibility is to preach the Gospel faithfully; but the work is the Lord’s. We are to be patient and show true love to the lost; above all we are to be prayerful, seeking the working of our Almighty God: “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts.”⁶⁹ “I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase”.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Mark 16: 15

⁶⁶ Acts 10: 43

⁶⁷ Romans 10: 13

⁶⁸ 1 Corinthians 15: 58

⁶⁹ Zechariah 4: 6

⁷⁰ 1 Corinthians 3: 6

J.C. Ryle wrote:

Who are we that we should pretend to know who will be found God's Elect at last? No! indeed. Those who now seem first may prove last, and those who seem last may prove first in the judgment day. We will invite all, in the firm belief that the invitation will do good to some. We will prophesy to the dry bones, if God commands us. We will offer life to all, though many reject the offer.⁷¹

Dr. Packer summarised the situation:

What, then, are we to say about the suggestion that a hearty faith in the absolute sovereignty of God is inimical to evangelism? We are bound to say that anyone who makes this suggestion thereby shows that he has simply failed to understand what the doctrine of divine sovereignty means. Not only does it undergird evangelism, and uphold the evangelist, by creating a hope of success that could not otherwise be entertained; it also teaches us to bind together preaching and prayer; and as it makes us bold and confident before men, so it makes us humble and importunate before God.⁷²

Hugh Latimer, the greatest preacher of the English Reformation, declared:

But some will say now, "What need we preachers then? God can save his elect without preachers." A goodly reason! No, no; I must keep the way that God hath ordained, and use the ordinary means that God hath assigned, and not seek new ways. This office of preaching is the only ordinary way that God hath appointed to save us all by. Let us maintain this, for I know no other; neither think I God will appoint or devise any other.⁷³

⁷¹ Ryle, *Old Paths*, 469; 2013 edition, 439

⁷² Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, 125

⁷³ G.E. Corrie (ed.), *Sermons of Hugh Latimer* [I] (1845), 306

“All things were created by him, and for him”⁷⁴ – “to the praise of the glory of his grace”

Article XVII teaches us God’s everlasting purpose to save those whom he hath chosen in Christ, and the path the elect in Christ follow from damnation to salvation. It teaches us that we may know our election in Christ, and the benefits that knowledge brings. It teaches us the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, and of its promises set forth generally – to all men. Election speaks to us of the sovereignty of God’s grace, and grants us assurance of our salvation, as that salvation depends solely on God, and not on us. Election will infallibly issue in good works, the fruit not the cause of God’s grace. Election is at the root of the distinction between the visible church and the invisible church, and enables us to gain a true perspective of much that we see in the church today that might otherwise be confusing. Election is an encouragement to faithful and obedient evangelism, in dependency on the almighty power of God.

He hath chosen us in [Christ] 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 grace⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Colossians 1: 16

⁷⁵ Ephesians 1: 4-6

The Sovereignty of God in Salvation

– *The teaching of Article XVII of the Church of England*

Article XVII, the longest of the XXXIX Articles of the Church of England, teaches the important Biblical doctrine ‘Of Predestination and Election’.

The Article expounds God’s everlasting purpose to save those whom he has chosen in Christ, and the path the elect in Christ follow from damnation to salvation. It declares that we may know our election in Christ, and the benefits that knowledge brings. It teaches us the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, and of its promises set forth generally – to all men.

Election speaks to us of the sovereignty of God’s grace, and grants us assurance of our salvation, as that salvation depends solely on God, and not on us. Election will infallibly issue in good works, the fruit not the cause of God’s grace. Election is at the root of the distinction between the visible church and the invisible church, and enables us to gain a true perspective of much that we see in the church today that might otherwise be confusing. Election is an encouragement to faithful and obedient evangelism, in dependency on the almighty power of God.

As the Article declares, ‘the godly consideration of Predestination, and our Election in Christ, is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons, and such as feel in themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ’.

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