

XVII.

What Is It?

“We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.” — *1 John iii. 14.*

It is unnecessary to say that the scope of these discussions does not include the redemptive work as a whole, which in its choicest sense is not of the Holy Spirit alone, but of the Triune God whose royal majesty shines and sparkles in it with excellent glory. It includes not only the work of the Holy Spirit, but even more that of the Father and of the Son. And in these three we see the triune activity of the tender mercies of the Triune God.

These discussions treat only that part of the work which reveals the operation of the Holy Spirit.

The first question in order is that of the so-called “preparatory grace.” This is a question of surpassing importance, since Methodism⁸ neglects it and modern orthodoxy abuses it, in order to make the determining choice in the work of grace once more to depend upon man’s free will.

Regarding the principal point, it must be conceded that there is a “*gratia præparans*,” as our old theologians used to call it, *i.e.*, a preparatory grace; not a preparation of grace, but a grace which prepares, which is in its preparatory workings real grace, undoubted and unadulterated. The Church has always maintained this confession by its soundest interpreters and noblest confessors. It could not surrender it as long as God is indeed eternal, unchangeable, and omnipresent; but by it must forcibly protest against the untrue representation that God lets a man be born and live for years unnoticed and independent of Himself, suddenly to convert him at the moment of His pleasure, from that hour to make him the object of His care and keeping.

Tho it can not be denied that the sinner shared this delusion because as he cared not for God, why then should God care for him?—yet the Church may not encourage him in this ungodly idea. For it belittles the divine virtues, glories, and attributes. Heretics of every name and origin have made the soul’s salvation their chief study, but almost always have neglected the *knowledge of God*. And yet every creed begins with: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth”; and the value of all that follows concerning Christ and our redemption depends only upon the correct interpretation of that first article. Hence the Church has always insisted upon a pure and correct knowledge of God in every confession and in every part of the redemptive Work; and has considered it its principal duty and privilege to guard the purity of this knowledge. Even a soul’s salvation should not be desired at the expense of the slightest injury to the purity of that confession.

8 See the author’s explanation of Methodism, section 5 of the Preface.

Regarding the work of preparatory grace, it was before all things necessary to examine whether the knowledge of God had been retained in its purity, or whether to favor the sinner it had been distorted and twisted. And tested by this, it can not be denied that God's care for His elect does not begin at an arbitrary moment, but is interwoven with their whole existence, including their conception, and even before their conception, with the mysteries of that redeeming love which declares: "I have loved thee with an everlasting love." Hence it is unthinkable that God should have left a sinner to himself for years, to arrest him at a certain moment in the midst of his life.

Nay, if God is to remain *God* and His omnipresent power unlimited, a sinner's salvation must be an *eternal* work, embracing his entire existence—a work whose roots are hidden in the unseen foundations of the wondrous mercies which extend far beyond his conception. It can not be denied that a man, converted at twenty-five, was during his godless life the subject of the divine labor, care, and protection; that in his conception and before his birth God's hand held him and brought him forth; yea, that even in the divine counsel the work must be traced which God has wrought for him long before his conversion:

The confession of election and foreordination is essentially the recognition of a grace active long before the hour of conversion. The idea that from eternity God had recorded a mere arbitrary name or figure, to quicken it only after many centuries, is truly ungodly. Nay, God's elect never stood before His eternal vision as mere names or figures; but every soul elect is also foreordained to stand before Him in his complete development, the object in Christ of God's *eternal* pleasure.

Christ's sacrifice on Calvary, which satisfies for the elect, justifying them by His Resurrection, was not accomplished independently of the elect, but included them all. The resurrection is a work of the divine Omnipotence, in which God brings back from the dead not only Christ *without* His own, but Christ *with* His own. Hence every saint with clear spiritual vision confesses that his heavenly Father performs in him an eternal work, not begun only in his conversion, but wrought in the eternal counsel through the periods of old and new covenants; in his person all the days of his life, and which will work in him throughout eternity. Even in this general sense the Church may not neglect to confess preparatory grace.

However, the question is narrowed when, excluding what precedes our birth, we consider only our sinful life before conversion, or the years intervening between the age of discretion and the hour when the scales fell from our eyes.

During those years we departed from God, instead of coming more closely to Him. Sin broke out more violently in one than in another, but there was iniquity in us all. As often as the plummet was let down beside our souls, they appeared out of the perpendicular. And during this *sinful period*, many hold that *preparatory grace is out of the question*. They say, "Where sin is, there can be no grace"; hence during those years the Lord leaves the sinner to himself, to return to him when sin's bitter fruit shall be ripe enough to move him to faith



and repentance. They deny not God's gracious election and foreordination, neither His care for His elect in their birth; but they do deny His preparatory grace during the years of alienation, and believe that His grace begins to operate only when it breaks forth in their conversion.

Of course there is some truth in this; there is such a thing as the abandoning of the sinner to iniquity, when God lets a man walk in his own ways, giving him up unto vile passions to do things that are unseemly. But instead of interrupting God's labor upon such a soul, the very words of Scripture, "to give them up," "to give them over" (*Rom. i. 24, 28*), show that this drifting away upon the current of sin is not without God's notice. Men have confessed that, if inward sin had not revealed itself, breaking forth in its fury, they would never have discovered the inward corruption nor have cried to God for mercy. The realization of their guilt and the remembrance of their fearful past have been to many saints powerful incitements to labor with strong hands and pitying hearts for the rescue of those hopelessly lost in the same deadly waters from which they had been saved. The remembrance of the deep corruption from which they are now delivered has been to many the most potent safeguard from fancied self-righteousness, proud bearing, and the conceit of being holier than others. Many depths of reconciliation and grace have been discovered and sounded only by hearts so deeply wounded that, for the covering of their guilt, a mere superficial confession of the atoning blood could not suffice. How deeply did David fall; and who ever shouted from mercy's depths more jubilantly than he? Who impressed the Church's pure confession more profoundly than Augustine, incomparable among the Church fathers, who from the abyss of his own guilt and inward brokenness had learned to gaze upon the firmament of God's eternal mercies. Even from this extreme view of man's sinful way it can not be affirmed that in that way God's grace was suspended. Light and shadow are here necessarily blended.

And this is not all. Even tho by sin we have forfeited all, and the sinful ego, however virtuous outwardly, has tintured every action of life with sin, yet this is not all of life. In the midst of it all, life was shaped and developed. The sinner of five-and-twenty differs from the child of three, who by his ugly temper plainly showed his sinful nature. During all those years the child has become a man. That which slumbered in him has gradually manifested itself. Influences have wrought upon him. Knowledge has been mastered and increased. Talents have been awakened and developed. Memory and remembrance have accumulated treasures of experience. However sinful the form, the character has become settled and some of its traits have adopted definite lines. The child has become a man—a person, living, existing, and thinking differently from other persons. And in all this, so confesses the Church, was the hand of the Omnipresent and Almighty God. It is He who during all these years of resistance has guided and directed His creature according to His own purpose.

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Sooner or later the Sun of Grace will rise upon him, and, since much depends upon the condition in which grace shall find him, it is the Lord God Himself who prepares that condition. He prepares it by graciously restraining his character from adopting traits which would prevent him later on from running his course in the kingdom of God, and, on the other hand, by graciously developing in him such character and such features as will appear after his conversion adapted to the task which God intended for him.

And so it is evident that even during the time of alienation God bestows grace upon His elect. Afterward he will perceive how evidently all things have worked together for good, not because he intended it so, but in spite of his sinful intentions, and only because the protecting grace of God was working in and by and through it all. His course might have been altogether different. That it is as it is, and not much worse, he owes not to himself, but to higher favor. Hence, reviewing his life's dark background, the saint thinks at first that it contains but a night of Satanic darkness; later on, being better instructed, he perceives through that darkness a faint glimmer of divine love.

In fact, in his life there are three distinct periods of thankfulness:

First, immediately after his conversion, when he can think of no other reason of thankfulness than the *newly found grace*.

Second, when he learns to render thanks also for the grace of his *eternal election*, extending far behind the first grace.

Lastly, when the darkness between election and conversion being dispelled, he thanks God for the *preparatory grace* which in the midst of that darkness watched over his soul.

XVIII.

What It Is Not.

“We are His workmanship.”

—*Ephes. ii. 10.*



In the preceding article we contended that there is preparatory grace. In opposition to the contemporary deism of the Methodists,⁹ the Reformed churches ought to confess this excellent truth in all its length and breadth. But it should not be abused to reestablish the sinner's free will, as the Pelagians did, and the Arminians after them, and as the Ethicals do now, tho differently.

The Methodist errs in saying that God does not care for the sinner until He suddenly arrests him in his sinful way. Nor may we tolerate the opposite error, the denial of regeneration, the new starting-point in the life of the sinner, which would make the whole work of conversion but an *awakening of dormant* and suppressed energies. There is no gradual transition; conversion is not merely the healing of disease, or an uprising of what had been suppressed; least of all, the arousing of dormant energies.

As regards his first birth, the child of God was *dead*, and can be brought to life only by a second *birth* as real as the first. Generally the person so favored is not conscious of it. In the nature of the case, man is unconscious of his first birth. Consciousness comes only with the years. And the same applies to regeneration, of which he was unconscious until the time of his conversion; and that may be ten or twenty years.

The grounds upon which the Church confesses that a large majority of men are born again *before* holy Baptism are *many* indeed; wherefore, in Baptism, it addresses the infants of believers as being regenerate.

And what do the Semi-Pelagians of all times and shades, and the Ethicals of the present time, teach concerning this? They lower the first act of God in the sinners to a sort of preparatory grace, imparted not only to the elect, but to all baptized persons. They represent it as follows:

First, all men are conceived and born in sin; and if God did not take the first step, all would perish.

Second, He imparts to the children born in the Christian Church a sort of assisting grace, relieving inability.

Third, hence every baptized person has the power to choose or reject the offered grace.

Fourth, wherefore, out of the many who received preparatory grace, some choose life and others perish.



9 See section 5 in Preface.