

The Doctrines of Election
&
Final Perseverance

By John Newton

[Copyright in Public Domain]

www.reformedontheweb.com

LETTER IX

On the Doctrines of Election and final Perseverance.

Dear Sir,

Your letter breathes the spirit of a Christian, though you say you are not a Calvinist. I should have still confined myself, in my letters, to the great truths in which we are agreed, if you had not invited me to touch upon the points wherein we differ. If you were positive and peremptory in your present sentiments, I should not think it my duty to debate with you: in that case, we might contend as much for victory as for truth. But as you profess yourself an inquirer, and are desirous of forming your judgment agreeably to the word of God, without being influenced by the authority of names and parties, I willingly embrace the occasion you offer me. You say, that though you are not prejudiced against the doctrines of election and perseverance of the saints, they appear to you attended with such difficulties, that you cannot yet heartily and fully assent to them. May the Lord the Spirit, whose office it is to guide his people into all truth, dictate to my pen, and accompany what I shall write with his blessing. It is not my intention to prove and illustrate these doctrines at large, or to encounter the various objections that have been raised against them. So much has been done in this way already, that I could only repeat what has been said to greater advantage by others. Nor need I refer you to the books which have been professedly written upon this argument. In a letter to a friend, I shall not aim at the exactness of a disputant, but only offer a few unpremeditated hints, in the same manner as if I had the pleasure of personally conversing with you.

Permit me to remind you, in the first place, of that important aphorism, Joh 26 3:27, (which, by the bye, seems to speak strongly in favor, of the doctrines in question): "A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from Heaven." If you should accede to my opinions upon my persuasion only, you would be little benefited by the exchange. The Lord alone can give us the true, vital, comfortable, and useful knowledge of his own truths. We may become wise in notions, and so far masters of a system, or scheme of doctrine, as to be able to argue, object, and fight, in favor of our own hypothesis, by dint of application, and natural abilities; but we rightly understand what we say, and whereof we affirm, no farther than we have a spiritual perception of it wrought in our hearts by the power of the Holy Ghost. It is not, therefore, by noisy disputation, but by humble waiting upon God in prayer, and a careful perusal of his holy word, that we are to expect a satisfactory, experimental, and efficacious knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus. I am persuaded that you are seeking in this way: if so, I am confident you shall not seek in vain. The Lord teaches effectually, though for the most part gradually. The path of the just is compared to the light, which is very faint at the early dawn, but shineth more and more to the perfect day.

If you sincerely seek the Lord's direction by prayer, you will of course make use of his appointed means of information, and search the Scriptures. Give me leave to offer you the following advises, while you are reading and comparing spiritual things with spiritual. First, Not to lay too great stress upon a few detached texts, but seek for that sense which is most agreeable to the general strain of the Scripture. The infallible word of God must, doubtless, be consistent with itself: if it does not appear so to us, the obscurity and seeming inconsistency must be charged to the remaining darkness and ignorance of our minds. As many locks, whose wards differ, are opened with equal ease by one master-key; so there is a certain comprehensive view of scriptural truth, which opens hard places, solves objections, and happily reconciles, illustrates, and harmonizes many texts, which to those who have not this master-key, frequently styled the analogy of faith, appear little less than contradictory to each other. When you obtain

this key, you will be sure that you have the right sense.

Again: You will do well to consult experience as you go along. For though this is not to be depended upon in the first instance, but must itself be subjected to the rule of the written word, yet it is a good subordinate help. Consider which sense is most agreeable to what passes within you and around you, and which best answers to the dealings of God with yourself, and to what you can observe of his dealings with others.

Farther: When you are led (as I think you will be, if you are not already) to view the Calvinist doctrines in a favorable light, be not afraid of embracing them, because there may be perhaps some objections which, for want of a full possession of the key I mentioned, you are not able to clear up; but consider if there are not as strong or stronger objections against the other side. We are poor weak creatures; and the clearing up of every difficulty is not what we are immediately called to, but rather to seek that light which may strengthen and feed our souls.

Lastly: Compare the tendency of different opinions. This is an excellent rule, if we can fairly apply it. Whatever is from God, has a sure tendency to ascribe glory to him, to exclude boasting from the creature, to promote the love and practice of holiness, and increase our dependence upon his grace and faithfulness. The Calvinists have no reason to be afraid of resting the merits of their cause upon this issue; notwithstanding the unjust misrepresentations which have been often made of their principles, and the ungenerous treatment of those who would charge the miscarriages of a few individuals, as the necessary consequence of embracing those principles.

But I must check myself, or I shall finish my letter before I properly begin my subject. You have objections to the doctrine of election. You will however agree with me, that the Scripture does speak of it, and that in very strong and express terms, particularly St. Paul. I have met with some sincere people, as I believe, who have told me, they could not bear to read his 9th chapter to the Romans, but always passed it over: so that their prejudices against election prejudiced them against a part of the Scripture likewise. But why so, unless because the dreaded doctrine is maintained too plainly to be evaded? But you will say, that some writers and preachers attempt to put an easier sense upon the Apostle's words. Let us judge then, as I lately proposed, from experience. Admitting, what I am sure you will admit, the total depravity of human nature, how can we account for the conversion of a soul to God, unless we likewise admit an election of grace? The work must begin somewhere. Either the sinner first seeks the Lord, or the Lord first seeks the sinner. The former is impossible, if by nature we are dead in trespasses and sins; if the god of this world has blinded our eyes, and maintains the possession of our hearts; and if our carnal minds, so far from being disposed to seek God, are enmity against him. Let me appeal to yourself. I think you know yourself too well to say, that you either sought or loved the Lord first: perhaps you are conscious, that for a season, and so far as in you lay, you even resisted his call; and must have perished, if he had not made you willing in the day of his power, and saved you in defiance of yourself. In your own case, you acknowledge that he began with you; and it must be the case universally with all that are called, if the whole race of mankind are by nature enemies to God. Then, farther, there must be an election, unless All are called. But we are assured that the broad road, which is thronged with the greatest multitudes, leads to destruction. Were not you and I in this road? Were we better than those who continue in it still? What has made us differ from our former selves? Grace. What has made us differ from those who are now as we once were? Grace. Then this grace, by the very terms, must be differencing, or distinguishing grace; that is, in other words, electing grace. And to suppose that God should make this election or choice only at the time of our calling, is not only unscriptural, but contrary to the dictates of reason, and the ideas we have of the Divine perfections, particularly those of omniscience and immutability. They who believe there is any power in man by nature, whereby he can turn to God, may contend for a conditional election upon the foresight of faith and obedience: but while others dispute, let

you and me admire, for we know that the Lord foresaw us (as we were) in a state utterly incapable either of believing or obeying, unless he was pleased to work in us to will and to do according to his own good pleasure.

As to final perseverance, whatever judgment we form of it in a doctrinal view, unless we ourselves do so persevere, our profession of religion will be utterly vain; for only "they that endure to the end shall be saved." It should seem, that whoever believes this, and is duly apprised of his own weakness, the number and strength of his spiritual enemies, and the difficulties and dangers arising from his situation in this evil world, will at least be desirous to have (if possible) some security that his labor and expectation shall not be in vain. To be at an uncertainty in a point of so great importance; to have nothing to trust to for our continuance in well-doing, but our own feeble efforts, our partial diligence and shortsighted care; must surely be distressing, if we rightly consider how unable we are in ourselves to withstand the forces of the world, the flesh, and the devil, which are combined against our peace. In this view I should expect, that the opposers of this doctrine, if thoroughly sensible of their state and situation, upon a supposition, that they should be able to prove it unscriptural and false, would weep over their victory, and be sorry that a sentiment, so apparently suited to encourage and animate our hope, should not be founded in truth. It is not to be wondered at, that this doctrine, which gives to the Lord the glory due to his name, and provides so effectually for the comfort of his people, should be opposed and traduced by men of corrupt hearts. But it may well seem strange, that they who feel their need of it, and cannot be comfortable without it, should be afraid or unwilling to receive it. Yet many a child of light is walking in darkness upon this account. Either they are staggered by the sentiments of those whom they think wiser than themselves, or stumbled by the falls of professors who were once advocates for this doctrine, or perplexed because they cannot rightly understand those passages of Scripture which seem to speak a different language. But, as light and knowledge increase, these difficulties are lessened. The Lord claims the honor; and he engages for the accomplishment of a complete salvation, that no power shall pluck his people out of his hand, or separate them from his love. Their perseverance in grace, besides being asserted hi many express promises, may be proved with the fullest evidence from the unchangeableness of God, the intercession of Christ, the union which subsists between him and his people, and from the principle of spiritual life he has implanted in their hearts, which in its own nature is connected with everlasting life; for grace is the seed of glory. I have not room to enlarge on these particulars, but refer you to the following texts, from which various strong and invincible arguments might be drawn for their confirmation: Luk_14:28-30, compared with Phi_45 1:6; Heb_45 7:25, with Rom_45 8:34-39; Joh_45 14:19, with Joh_45 15:1-2; Joh_45 4:14. Upon these grounds, my friend, why may not you, who have fled for refuge to the hope set before you, and committed your soul to Jesus, rejoice in his salvation; and say, "While Christ is the foundation, root, head, and husband of his people, while the word of God is Yea and Amen, while the counsels of God are unchangeable, while we have a Mediator and High Priest before the throne, while the Holy Spirit is willing and able to bear witness to the truths of the Gospel, while God is wiser than men, and stronger than Satan, so long the believer in Jesus is and shall be safe? Heaven and earth must pass away; but the promise, the oath, the blood, on which my soul relies, affords me a security which can never fail."

As the doctrines of election and perseverance are comfortable, so they cut off all pretense of boasting and self-dependence when they are truly received in the heart, and therefore tend to exalt the Savior. Of course they stain the pride of all human glory, and leave us nothing to glory in but the Lord. The more we are convinced of our utter depravity and inability from first to last, the more excellent will Jesus appear. The whole may give the physician a good word, but the sick alone know how to prize him. And here I cannot but remark a difference between those who have nothing to trust to but free grace, and those who ascribe a little at least to some good disposition and ability in man. We assent to whatever they enforce from the word of God on the subject of sanctification. We acknowledge its importance, its excellency, its beauty; but we could wish they would join more with us in exalting the Redeemer's name. Their

experience seems to lead them to talk of themselves, of the change that is wrought in them, and the much that depends upon their own watchfulness and striving. We likewise would be thankful if we could perceive a change wrought in us by the power of grace; we desire to be found watching likewise. But when our hopes are most alive, it is less from a view of the imperfect beginnings of grace in our hearts, than from an apprehension of him who is our all in all. His person, his love, his sufferings, his intercession, compassion, fulness, and faithfulness,--these are our delightful themes, which leave us little leisure, when in our best frames, to speak of ourselves. How do our hearts soften, and our eyes melt, when we feel some liberty in thinking and speaking of him! For we had no help in time past, nor can have any in time to come, but from him alone. If any persons have contributed a mite to their own salvation, it was more than we could do. If any were obedient and faithful to the first calls and impressions of his Spirit, it was not our case. If any were prepared to receive him beforehand, we know that we were in a state of alienation from him. We needed sovereign, irresistible grace to save us, or we had been lost for ever. If there are any who have a power of their own, we must confess ourselves poorer than they are. We cannot watch, unless he watches with us; we cannot strive, unless he strives with us; we cannot stand one moment, unless he holds us up; and we believe we must perish after all, unless his faithfulness is engaged to keep us. But this we trust he will do, not for our righteousness, but for his own name's sake, and because, having loved us with an everlasting love, he has been pleased in loving kindness to draw us to himself, and to be found of us when we sought him not.

Can you think, dear Sir, that a person who lives under the influence of these sentiments, will desire to continue in sin because grace abounds? No: you are too candid an observer of men and manners, to believe the calumnies which are propagated against us. It is true, there are too many false and empty professors amongst us; but are there none amongst those who hold the opposite sentiments? And I would observe, that the objection drawn from the miscarriages of reputed Calvinists is quite beside the purpose. We maintain, that no doctrines or means can change the heart, or produce a gracious conversation, without the efficacious power of Almighty grace: therefore, if it is found to be so in fact, it should not be charged against our doctrine, but rather admitted as a proof and confirmation of it. We confess, that we fall sadly short in every thing, and have reason to be ashamed and amazed that we are so faintly influenced by such animating principles; yet, upon the whole, our consciences bear us witness, and we hope we may declare it both to the church and to the world without just fear of contradiction, that the doctrines of grace are doctrines according to godliness.

I am, &c.