

AN OVERVIEW OF
THE PREDESTINATION CONTROVERSY

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By way of introduction to our study of this turbulent and fiery controversy we do well to focus in on the correct understanding of the doctrine of election/predestination as taught by Scripture and the Lutheran confessions. We begin with a definition from a dogmatician who himself witnessed the development of this controversy--Franz Pieper:

"The election of grace may therefore be defined as the eternal act of God by which from eternity out of pure grace for Christ's sake he has decreed to bestow those blessings on the Christians which through his call they now enjoy--conversion, justification, sanctification, and preservation in faith."¹

It is absolutely essential to the proper understanding of election that we view it as an act of God's grace. This will not surprise us of course because we know that every aspect of our salvation is dominated by God's grace. So too with election. Paul wrote to Timothy (2 Tim. 1:9), "Who has saved us and called us to a holy life--not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time." The apostle emphasized the same motive of grace in his letter to the Ephesians (1:4-5), "In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will." In love, because of his grace God chose us and NOT because he found anything in us which was lovable or worthy of his election. The fact that this election took place in eternity before the

beginning of time and certainly before mankind could even think of doing something good and honorable highlights the truth that God's election of Christians was SOLA GRATIA.

Not only was God's motive grace, but his method and instrument was the Means of Grace. His decree of election was inseparably connected with the Means of Grace. It would be a gross and pernicious error to think of that decree as some superior act of God's omnipotence, or as some absolute and arbitrary process of selection. God did not just pick names out of a hat. 2 Thessalonians 2:13, "But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth." Likewise in 1 Peter 1:2, "who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood." God did not simply elect a bunch of people who would be citizens of heaven some day. He chose people upon whom he would shower the blessings of his grace and work through the Holy Spirit so that they would come to faith, be preserved in that faith, and show fruits of faith. Pieper's definition quoted above makes this point.

Understanding the doctrine of election as one that is thoroughly saturated with the grace of God, we can also appreciate the purposes for which God revealed this amazing truth. What great comfort and assurance this revelation bestows on the Christian! We have been chosen from eternity to become God's children by faith and persevere in that faith. Nothing can thwart God's purpose for us. All the trials and persecutions will

not achieve the destructive intentions of their evil authors, but will instead be used by our heavenly Father for our good because we are God's chosen ones, as Paul reminds us together with the Romans (8:28), "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Even when the dark days of the last times descend upon the earth, we can be certain that even the most intriguing deceptions of hell will not overthrow the faith of God's elect. Jesus himself gave us that assurance (Mt. 24:24), "For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect--if that were possible."

The framers of the Formula of Concord dealt with the doctrine of election in Article XI. Their words became a point of contention in the Controversy, both sides claiming support from the Formula depending on one's interpretation. The Formula states:

"First, the distinction between the eternal foreknowledge of God and the eternal election of his children to eternal salvation, is carefully to be observed. God's foreknowledge extends over all creatures, good and bad; namely, that he foresees and foreknows everything that is or will be, that is occurring or will occur, whether it be good or bad, since before God all things, whether they be past or future, are manifest and present.

The eternal election of God, however, that is, God's ordination to salvation, does not extend at once over the godly and the wicked, but only over the children of God.

The foreknowledge of God foresees and foreknows also that which is evil; however, not in such a manner as though it were God's gracious will that it should happen.

The eternal election of God, however, not only foresees and foreknows the salvation of the elect, but is also, from the gracious will and pleasure of

God in Christ Jesus, a cause which procures, works, helps, and promotes our salvation and what pertains thereto; and upon this our salvation is so founded that the gates of hell cannot prevail against it (Mt. 16:18)."²

According to the FC God's election is limited to the children of God and does not extend over all people. In addition, God's election does not simply foreknow the salvation of the elect, but also causes it in such a way that hell itself cannot prevent salvation.

With these clear passages of Scripture and the Lutheran confessions in mind, we now turn our attention to the controversy. Let us begin with a chronological table of events to review the main historical events of the controversy:

Setting the Stage (1863-1877)

1863 - Walther publishes one of his earliest articles on predestination.

1868-1871 - J.A. Huegeli delivers his essay, "The Doctrine of Good Works in Respect to the Doctrine of Free Will, of Election, and Justification," to conventions of the Northern District of the Missouri Synod.

The Fritschel brothers of the Iowa Synod attack the essay as Calvinistic. Walther comes to the defense of Huegeli, and is promptly accused of being a crypto-Calvinist.

1871-1874 - The debate between the Fritschels and Walther continues.

(1872 - Synodical Conference is formed, consisting of the Ohio, Missouri, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Norwegian Synods.)

1874 - Friedrich Schmidt of the Norwegian Synod defends Walther's position regarding predestination in the publication, Lehre und Wehre.

1877

-Meeting of the Western District of the Missouri Synod. Walther discusses the doctrine of predestination under the general topic: "The Doctrine of the Lutheran Church Alone Gives All

Glory to God--an Irrefutable Proof That Its Doctrine Is the Only True Doctrine."

-The discussion of predestination continues in the theological journal. Critics of Walther's position become more vocal.

1878

-Schmidt continues to support close ties between the Norwegian Synod and the Missouri Synod in response to Norwegian Prof. Ole Asperheim's proposal to sever relations with Missouri.

-Election of professors to St. Louis seminary. Schmidt considered a foremost candidate, and enjoyed support of Walther, but was passed by, not even placed in nomination.

1879

January 2 - Schmidt presents his objections to Walther concerning the latter's predestination presentation at the 1877 district convention.

-Schmidt notifies President Schwan of the Missouri Synod that he is going to publicize his disagreement with Walther concerning predestination.

-Schmidt and his ally, H.A. Allwardt, are brought before O. Fuerbringer, President of the Northern District, for a conference. No agreement was achieved.

-Meeting of the Western District. Walther continues his discussion of predestination and sharply criticizes his opponents.

1880

January - Schmidt begins publication of his monthly, Altes und Neues to counteract Missouri's "antisciptural, anticonfessional, and crypto-Calvinistic view of election."

Sept. 29-Oct. 5 - Special pastoral conference in Chicago to strengthen unity in the Missouri Synod. 467 in attendance, not including Schmidt. Walther the key speaker at the conference. Lack of harmony among pastors becomes evident.

1881

Jan. 5-10 - Colloquium in Milwaukee involving the theological professors, district presidents, and synodical presidents of the Synodical Conference. Show-down between Walther and Schmidt. Discussion of key election passages such as Rom. 8:29 reveals fundamental differences between the two

sides. Representatives of Ohio Synod walk out.
Meeting ends with declaration of theological war.

February - In the issue of Lehre und Wehre Walther retracts some of the unclear language he had used in his essays and theses, also apologizes for harshness with opponents. His position remains unchanged, but his language is refined.

The Ohio Synod officially aligns itself with Schmidt's position on predestination. Publication of The Columbus Theological Magazine containing articles attacking Missouri's position.

Prof. Stelhorn from Fort Wayne writes for The Columbus Theological Magazine, later accepts call to the Ohio Synod seminary in Columbus.

May 11-21 - Missouri Synod convention in Fort Wayne. Discussion and adoption of Walther's 13 Theses on Election.

September - Meeting in West Virginia, the Ohio Synod resolves to withdraw from the Synodical Conference. Adoption of 4 Theses on Election, highlighting differences with Missouri.

14 pastors leave the Ohio Synod, eventually join the Missouri Synod.

Relative peace restored.

1882

-Meeting of Wisconsin and Minnesota Synods in LaCrosse. Formal approval of Missouri's position on election and conversion as being the Scriptural position.

October - Convention of the Synodical Conference in Chicago. Schmidt attends as the elected delegate from the Minnesota district of the Norwegian Synod. Protest from the Missouri, Wisconsin, and Minnesota Synods against Schmidt being seated at the convention. Reasons: Schmidt had condemned the Synodical Conference position on predestination as being Calvinistic, and he had caused confusion and separation among the congregations of the Synodical Conference.

1883

-As a result of Schmidt's embarrassment at the Synodical Conference convention, the Norwegian Synod withdraws from the Synodical Conference. Two-thirds of the pastors and congregations of the Norwegian Synod, including President Preus, support Walther's position. Relations with MO remain cordial.

At the very heart and core of the Predestination Controversy was the conflict between two theological giants--F.A. Schmidt and C.F.W. Walther. As we noted in the chronological table, these two men were not always at odds. In fact, they seemed to be in close agreement and friendship until 1879. Schmidt was educated in Missouri's theological institutions, graduating from the seminary in St. Louis in 1857. He served as professor in Norwegian Synod institutions from 1861 until 1885. He gained a reputation as an orthodox Lutheran theologian and an ardent supporter of Missouri Synod teachings. It was no fluke that Schmidt was under serious consideration for a professorship at the seminary in St. Louis. It was not strange that Walther fully supported him for that professorship. Predestination had been the topic of discussion in theological circles for 10 years already by 1878 and Schmidt never raised his voice in objection to Walther's articles and essays concerning the topic. It was not until 1879, just months after Schmidt had been turned down for the St. Louis professorship, that he publicly voiced opposition to Walther's stand on predestination. Was there a connection between those two events or was it just coincidence? Was Schmidt bitter and angry after his rejection in St. Louis so that he was looking for a way to strike back at Walther and Missouri? Or did Schmidt always hold his false opinions concerning predestination, keeping them secret until he realized he was not going to be professor in St. Louis? These questions have been the subject of much discussion and debate. It may be impossible to completely and conclusively answer those questions. Some will insist that

Schmidt was perfectly orthodox on the doctrine of election until 1878 when he was denied the professorship in St. Louis which he apparently wanted. They claim that his disappointment drove him to accuse Walther and Missouri of heresy. Others claim that there was always a small streak of synergism in Schmidt's theology, but he successfully suppressed it until the right time, and 1879 was the right time. Both sides could be argued, but there is no doubt that after 1879 the lines dividing Walther and Schmidt were very clearly drawn. Their differences in the doctrine of election were fundamental and uncompromising. We can sum up the differences thus:

Walther

1. Understood "election" in the narrow sense, applied particularly to individuals who are saved.
2. Predestined unto faith.
3. Predestination is the cause of faith and salvation.
4. The phrase "intuitu fidei" is foreign to Scripture and to Luther.
5. Was accused of denying universal grace.
6. Insisted he was giving all credit to God's grace and glory for our salvation.

Schmidt

1. Understood a "general election" meaning that all who believe in Christ will be saved.
2. Predestined in view of faith.
3. Faith is the cause for predestination.
4. While the phrase "intuitu fidei" is not explicitly used in Scripture or Luther, it is implied.
5. Was accused of denying SOLA GRATIA.
6. Insisted that man's faith plays an important role in salvation.

It may be true that the most turbulent period of the Predestination Controversy lasted about five years, but it took many more years for the dust to settle. Debates and arguments continued in more than one synod. Years later, church historians began to truly appreciate the serious effects which the controversy had. The size and character of the Synodical Conference had changed significantly. Ohio and the Norwegians had departed. Missouri controlled the leading role in the Conference now. But it was difficult for the Conference to attract new Lutheran synods into the body. Missouri's position on predestination alienated her from the rest of American Lutheranism. The other Lutheran synods may not have wholeheartedly supported Schmidt, but they generally preferred his position to the position of Walther.

The synod which probably suffered the most from the controversy was Schmidt's synod--the Norwegian Synod. The Norwegians withdrew from the Synodical Conference in 1883 but not because of any great hostility against Walther and Missouri. In fact, the majority of Norwegian pastors and congregations supported Walther's position, and relations between the Norwegians and Missouri remained cordial. Rather, it seems that the Norwegians withdrew from fellowship so as to more easily restore peace and harmony among themselves. The hopes for reconciliation were not realized however. Debates and splits continued in the Norwegian Synod through the first two decades of the 20th century.

Not all of the effects of the controversy were negative.

After all was said and done, the Missouri Synod emerged stronger and more unified. Ties between the remaining synods of the Synodical Conference--Missouri, Wisconsin, Minnesota--were also stronger than ever. It is true that while controversies divide, they also unite. Such was the case in the early Christian church. Such was the case at Luther's time. Such is still the case today.

As we look back at these events which occurred just a little more than one hundred years ago, there are many things that we can learn for the benefit of our own church. The debates between Schmidt and Walther at times became heated, caustic and vicious. Walther himself had to apologize for being unduly harsh with his opponents. Name-calling and mudslinging can very easily enter into theological debates. That is natural when one is talking about such sensitive and important issues as those found in Scripture. But such name-calling and mudslinging accomplish nothing constructive and only serve to inflame emotions. Walther realized that. We do well to realize it also.

The controversy concerning predestination also emphasized the importance of choosing words and phrases carefully when expressing theological truths. Opponents will be picking those words apart and capitalizing on vague and poorly chosen words. Walther found it necessary to change the wording he had used regarding predestination in order to clarify. In fact, the Wisconsin Synod expressed regret to Walther regarding some of his imprecise phraseology. Some modern critics have accused the WELS of poor wording regarding objective justification in

²its Kokomo Statements. Regardless of whether or not those accusations are founded, we are reminded of the scrutiny to which official statements are subjected, and the value of choosing words carefully.

Finally, we cannot overlook the fact that if God's truth is worth having, it is also worth fighting for. How easy it would have been if Walther would have been more tolerant of Schmidt's opinions and permitted "intuitu fidei" to be introduced into predestination. But Walther loved the truth too much. He held God's Word too dear. He could not permit such an aberration because to do so would have compromised and even sacrificed the truth and purity of God's Word. Walther preferred to go through the turmoil and headaches and heartbreaks for the sake of the Gospel. So we dare never allow our desire for peace and harmony to silence our lips in the face of heresy and false teachings. God's Word must indeed be defended or else it could be surrendered.

ENDNOTES

- ¹Franz Pieper, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), Vol. III, pp.473-474.
- ²Concordia Triglotta, "Formula of Concord (Art. XI)," (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), pp.1063-1065.

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