

[From *The Witness*, May, 1947, pp. 3-4]

ELECT UNTO OBEDIENCE

A Sermon Preached at the General Conference at Quarryville

GORDON H. CLARK

“Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.” 1 Peter 1:2.

THE apostle Peter is a vivid character, so human, with all his ups and downs. He boasted that he would defend the Lord, then he denied him; he repented and was forgiven. He preached the great sermon on Pentecost, and later at Antioch was rebuked for hypocrisy. And finally, tradition has it that he was crucified head downwards.

On one occasion when I was expounding the second chapter of Galatians, a certain gentleman was offended because I said that Peter was guilty of hypocrisy. But unfortunately it is true; Peter was guilty. He was so like ourselves. However another charge made against him is not true. If the Sadducees in Acts 4:13 when they called him an unlearned and ignorant man, meant that he was a stupid ignoramus, we need only turn to Peter's first epistle to see that he was far from stupid.

The theme of the epistle can be summarized, of course with considerable loss due to brevity, by one of the introductory phrase: *Elect unto Obedience*. The ideas of election and obedience recur at frequent intervals through the five short chapters.

I. ELECTION

It is the teaching of Peter and of the whole Bible that God elects people to salvation. The fact that God calls, chooses, or elects His servants is explicitly indicated at least eight times in this short epistle, and it is less clearly referred to in three or four other verses. When one considers

the variety of practical precepts that Peter includes, this recurrence of the doctrine of election is seen to be a matter of emphasis and importance.

Unfortunately election is not a popular doctrine, even among professing Christians. It is much more likely to cause offense than a reference to Peter's hypocrisy in Antioch. But the Bible teaches election and the faithful minister must preach it. Our Lord himself preached it when he said, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you. . ." It is instructive too to note that the doctrine was no more popular when Jesus preached it than now. Jesus lost some of his early popularity by preaching election. In John 6:65-66 Christ says, "no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father." This shows that the initiative in salvation belongs to God and not to man. But John immediately records that "From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him."

It is sad that some Christians – perhaps some even in our own church, do not enthusiastically receive the doctrine of election, for if God did not take the initiative, it is certain that the sinful heart of man never would.

There is a story of an elderly gentleman, a faithful Christian for many long years, who once testified, "I am saved because God and I cooperated; I did my part, and God did His." The people were astonished at this testimony, as he expected them to be; and after waiting a moment to let the people wonder what he might have contributed to his salvation, he continued, "I resisted, and God did the rest."

Peter knew that God had taken and had kept the initiative in his case. He was not offended at the notion of election, for he saw in it the source of all his blessings. Therefore he could write to us with joy that "ye are a *chosen* generation . . . that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath *called* you out of darkness into his marvelous light." We also should rejoice in God's electing grace.

II. OBEDIENCE

Peter is not concerned to explain the doctrine of election in great detail. He simply takes the biblical view for granted. What he wishes to emphasize is the purpose of election: we are elect unto obedience.

When a man comes to Christ, he comes in order to escape the penalty of sin and to find mercy, forgiveness, and pardon. But this is not all. A man comes to Christ in order also to escape from sin itself. He comes for the purpose of making progress with righteousness. He has turned with grief and hatred of his sin and with a purpose of new obedience. The people God chooses are chosen or elect unto obedience.

This teaching is very easy to understand; but it is also easy to forget. There is no need of profound explanation, but there is need of constant reminder. Any urchin in the street knows what is meant by: Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain, or, Thou shalt not steal. The trouble is, he does not obey.

Peter writes to remind us. It ought to be interesting and it is certainly instructive to take note of the specific Christian duties that Peter mentions. Consider these six or eight, taken more or less at random:

1:13 and 4:7 “Be sober; not flight, scatter-brained, entangled with the world.”

2:1 “Put away all malice, guile, insincerity, envy, slander. Have you done so?”

2:13 “Be a good citizen.”

2:18 “Be a good servant, if you are a servant.”

3:1 “Be a good wife, inwardly adorned.”

3:7 “Be a considerate husband.”

4:12 “Rejoice if you suffer for Christ, but do not suffer as a murderer, thief or wrongdoer.”

5:2 “Elders, tend the flock of God willingly, not domineering but as examples.”

These things need little explanation. Their meaning is clear enough, even to the reprobate. What we need is strength and grace to obey God’s commandments.

But there is another kind of obedience that Peter indicates. These commandments have all referred to overt actions. They are matters of ordinary morality. But obedience goes beyond these

easily observed outward acts. Peter also refers to an inward obedience of the mind. In 1:14 he connects disobedience and ignorance, and in 1:22 he connects obedience and truth. Of course the most obvious import of these connections is the simple fact that a man cannot obey a commandment if he does not know what the commandment is. One indispensable condition of a righteous life is a knowledge of God's revealed will. To be sure, men may know what the Bible commands and still refuse to obey; but no one can obey unless he has knowledge.

It is for such reasons as these that John Calvin said the understanding is "the guide and governor of the soul"; and "the intellect rules the will." Charles Hodge too, in explaining the original condition of man as created in knowledge and righteousness after the image of God (Col. 3:10) says, "his reason was subject to God; his will was subject to his reason." It is thus that the bible teaches the superior rank of the intellect over the will. And it is thus that we see that obedience is not simply a matter of external action, but includes the less obvious, more quiet, but extremely important matter of learning and understanding the Scriptures. Meditation and thought are not spectacular; Martha may have been right in supposing that dinner would be necessary sometime, but Mary chose the better part.

The understanding which Peter requires is not limited to an understanding of moral commandments. The obedience Peter emphasizes is not restricted to being a good citizen, a good wife, husband, or servant. Peter requires obedience to the whole Gospel. In fact he merges obedience and belief. Christ is a rock of offense and the unrighteous stumble because they disobey the word. But Christ is precious to those who believe (2:7, 8). The contrary of belief is therefore disobedience, and the contrary of obedience is disbelief. In 3:1 non-Christians are described as those who do not *obey* the word: that is, they do not believe. The internal, mental act of belief is therefore associated with obedience.

I think that this is a point that needs mention. The cares of life and the natural disinclination to study are barriers to an understanding of the Bible. Many good Christian saints, who have well learned the lessons of morality, who are everywhere acknowledged as good citizens, servants, wives, or husbands, still fail to find enough time for serious, consistent, methodical Bible study. But study is also obedience, and knowledge is the foundation of holiness.

Jesus said, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

Paul describes the ungodly as having a darkened understanding, alienated from the life of God through ignorance.

And Peter says (1:22) that Christians purify their souls by obedience to the truth.

All this is the purpose of election.

Some Christians are young and have not made great progress. They may need to attend more particularly to the elementary moral commandments. Let them hear and obey such instruction. Some Christians have already been long on their pilgrimage. They may need to leave the elementary principles of the doctrine of Christ and go on unto perfection. Let them search the deep things of the Spirit. Some as babes need the sincere milk of the word; others should eat strong meat. Each of us according to our needs – but in one way or another, all of us have to face the trials of life, the temptations of the world, and the assaults of the devil.

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you. Cast all your cares upon Him, for he cares for you. Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, establish, and strengthen you. To Him be the dominion for ever and ever. Amen.