

No.15, The Nature of God's Eternal Purpose to Save

Man fell from his state of innocence into one of sin and misery. By that fall he became guilty; and he lost his original righteousness and became corrupt in his entire nature. He, therefore, became subject to God's wrath & curse, all the miseries of this life and ultimately to the pains of hell forever.

However, in His eternal purpose, God decreed to save sinners. Thus, Scripture shows that in His eternal purpose the Lord foreknew or foreloved sinners and ordained them to everlasting life, predestinating them to be conformed to the image of Christ. Consequently, throughout time, the Lord executes what He purposed to do from all eternity. He intervenes in the lives of His people and He saves them to His own eternal glory. With regard to this execution of God's eternal plan by which sinners are brought into a state of grace, we may pose a number of questions as a means of summing up the this matter of the nature of God's eternal purpose to save sinners.

**1. Who actually saves sinners?**

In his book, *The Plan of Salvation*, Dr. B.B. Warfield refers to "the deepest cleft" that divides people who espouse Christianity. Dr. Warfield shows that this cleft or division exists because there are those who take a "naturalistic" view of salvation; while there are those who take a "supernaturalistic" view.

The *naturalistic* view is the contention that sinners save themselves. This is the same as what has been known in Church history as *Pelagianism* – the concept that their native powers are such that men are capable of doing everything that God requires of them for salvation.

The *supernaturalistic* view insists that *men are incapable of saving themselves and that all the powers essential to the salvation of the sinner must come from God*. This is of course the revelation of Scripture. Thus genuine N.T. Christianity believes and teaches that God saves men. This supernaturalistic concept is true of all the facets of N.T. Christianity – it is a supernatural religion, distinguishing it from all the other religions of the world. James 1: 17 really sums up this supernaturalistic view with regard to the saving of the soul: "*every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness neither shadow of turning.*" Note the words "from above" – this term denotes divine origin, a supernatural source for the entire realm of true spiritual life. It is the same term as is found in Luke 1: 3, translated "*from the very first...*" and used with reference to the supernatural origin of Luke's Gospel. It is the word used in John 3: 3 & 7 translated "*born again...*" or "born from above." The point is clear: since N.T. Christianity is entirely a supernatural religion, therefore it is God who saves men from their sin, Jonah 2: 9; and brings them into this state of grace.

**2. How does God save sinners?**

As with the former point so there is a division of opinion with regard to this matter of how God saves men. It is really variance over the question of the means that God employs in the saving of the soul. On one hand there are the *sacerdotal* churches, such as the Church of Rome, who teach that God deals with men through the sacraments. To use the words of Robert L. Dabney, Rome teaches that God has placed "*supernaturally endowed instrumentalities...*" between Himself and the sinner. By this term is meant the "sacraments" with Rome teaching that the powers essential to the salvation of the soul are channelled to the sinner through these instrumentalities. Rome's teaching is based for one thing on faulty view of sin – sin is merely the infraction or bending of rules that can be compensated by so-called good works.

According to Rome, the sacraments cause grace to flow to their recipients by the mere administration of them. It is by the supposed power of the officiating priest & the supposed power residing in the sacraments that grace is conveyed to the soul. In Rome's theology, the foundational sacrament is baptism by which the sinner is delivered from the guilt of original sin; and then through the sacraments of the Mass and penance post-baptismal sin is removed. Essentially then, the institution of Rome is the source and conveyed of grace to men. John Murray – "*The church is the depository of salvation and the sacraments the media of conveyance.*"

On the other hand and in direct opposition to sacerdotalism or sacramentalism there is *evangelicalism*. The historic sense of this term is that the sinner must depend on no intermediate instrumentality such as the sacraments or the church but directly & immediately on God alone. Evangelicalism insists that it is not only God who saves, but also that He saves by His direct & immediate work upon & in the soul by His Word & Spirit as the Gospel is preached, Rom 10: 17. By way of illustration see Acts 2: 37.

**3. Who are the objects of God's saving grace?**

Evangelicalism itself has suffered division over this matter of the objects of God's saving mercy. There are those who claim to be evangelical in that they are opposed to sacramentalism. But they contend that what God did with a view to saving men He did for all or He did universally, drawing no distinctions between men. The question then arises as to why not all men are saved? The question is completely valid, for – if it is God who saves by the immediate operation of His Spirit and Word through what He has done for all men, then all men will be saved.

But all men are not saved as Scripture, history & experience show. Why? According to the evangelical universalist it is because some men accept the Gospel and the rest reject it. But this means that the first point above – the supernaturalistic view, i.e. that it is God who saves – has been abandoned; and it is something that man does or becomes that determines whether he is saved or lost.

The Scriptural view is that God works in a particular way. One by one He brings to Himself and into a state of grace that people who, as we noted, from all eternity He purposed to save. B.B. Warfield – "*Men owe in each and every case their actual salvation...to Him. And therefore, to Him and to Him alone belongs in each instance all the glory, which none can share with Him.*" See Titus 3: 3-6 – note in v.3 the description of the former depraved behaviour in which God's people lived. In other words, what is required is divine intervention for there is no way that such sinners would even have any desire to seek the Lord. But this intervention is what is seen in v.v.4, 5 – the Lord stepping in to save individuals by operating directly & personally in their hearts; a work that is merited by Christ for those in whom it is wrought, v.6.