



Assurance of Election (1)

Doubt

For years there is a gnawing doubt in the heart of the congregation. It touches one of the most essential discoveries of the Reformation. God's gracious election has been called the heart of the church. If this is true, then the church is not healthy at all at some essential point.

Some are silent about election, as if it is a thorny question, which even theologians are not able to solve, let alone normal members of the congregation.

Others are getting scared when the subject is touched upon in preaching or conversation. Of them some have grown up with caricatures about God's election. They have become adults with the idea that it has been given few to penetrate to the heart of this matter, or they have been told systematically that one first should learn about all kinds of issues before one would be permitted to make the promise of the gospel your own (believe it as something also for you).

We also know the overreaction, which is evoked by an over-confident use of election. When a church community assumes without a doubt that they make up the elected race, and that therefore one should respect them, then it is understandable that things go wrong.

Overvaluation of Dort

One can also think about the overvaluation that is attributed to the Canons of Dort by some church communities. They represent a clear explanation about the doctrine of grace, such as is rarely found among the Reformed confessional statements. Rightly one has in history both in The Netherlands and abroad assigned great value to these statements of faith, in the form of theological propositions.

But if one forgets that they can only be understood in a certain context, it will go irrevocably wrong. They fit in a historical context, which mainly is characterized by a battle about the freedom of the will. And they have to be understood as part of the theology which at the beginning of the seventeenth century made inroads with the Reformed dogma, and did this with weapons, sharpened with a philosophy about which one does not always has to be enthusiastic. Furthermore, we should not forget either that these doctrines, with the many treasures of comfort that one can discover there, belong within the proportions of the complete confession, whereby we think in particular about the Belgic Confession of faith and the Heidelberg Catechism. Within the scale, indicated by these faith symbols, one needs to speak about the Canons of Dort. And then this message will provide comfort as well. This is how we can understand that this "Credo of the Secession" by Hendrik de Cock, very early in his ministry, was published anew.

Back to the Beginning

In some articles we asked the question how the "discoverers" of this doctrine have dealt with it themselves. Discoverers — this is how we are calling them, because from underneath the dust of the ages the preaching of Paul and Augustine has resurfaced. The history of this we leave alone. But in our mind we are seeing the well-known personalities, who have partly determined the image of the Reformation: Luther, Zwingli, Calvin. If we like to know what the Reformation understood about the doctrine of election, how it originated, how it was experienced, how it offered comfort, then we need to be with them.

But what an injustice we would do to the doctrine as such if we forgot that the above-mentioned leaders of the Reformation only could do their work because there were numerous people at their side. The working of the Word and Spirit was strong. From them we hear talk about the forcefulness, the effective activity of God's Word, established by the Holy Spirit. Keeping exactly this in mind, it can become clear to us that the Spirit was working not only through the great ones whose names are written in the church history books. He was just as well working in the hearts and through the mouths of a large number of others, whose works also have been preserved.

A Cloud of Witnesses

So it is possible to summon a cloud of witnesses, who in the time of the Reformation forcefully proclaimed the gospel themselves. It is reasonable that we are making their sound being heard as well. We are then preserved from that certainty of the rectilinear thinking, which knows only one pattern. In the multicoloured wisdom of God there are more nuances than we at first sight observe and try to record.

However, what is striking with the great diversity of how Reformed theologians have spoken about the election, that there exists a deep unity in the way they speak about the election of God: as foundation for comfort and security. One may emphasize that variety. And indeed there is a shift in emphasis here and there, of a different approach, or of a diversity regarding the form in which the doctrine of election was presented in preaching and pastoral care. But one should not overemphasize these differences. They disappear from sight once one has a feeling for the deeper unity. And this unity exists for a large part in the secure comfort, which was derived from doctrine of election.

Not a Suppressed Truth

If we would keep this in mind today, in the practice of our ecclesiastical life and discussions so busy with diversity, then we would move on, way further in understanding and recognizing each other. That would be a beautiful result.

But, let us mention it now already, that is not our goal in the first place. We will try to find out in which way the men in the beginning of the Reformation spoke and preached about these things. That this would be spoken and also preached about was without question. The Bible reveals the reality of God's election and therefore the church cannot be silent about it.

How one should speak and preach this, is a different question. There we are facing the diversity, which may be appreciated very positively. We can learn something from it. And in particular we would recognize again that the doctrine of election is a source of comfort and security. One does not need to avoid it.

Medicine against Vague and Slack Religion

Also that would be profitable. Perhaps there is more than before, a need for preaching about the free grace of God. That is contrary to a predominantly weak preaching, whereby the messenger almost excuses himself that he is mentioning the terms sin and grace. What can we still say from the pulpit when we are cutting out the heart of the gospel, to flatter a public that considers itself religious?

A real gospel, or no gospel at all. Even Paul talks about this in his gospel. He did not invent it. It had been revealed to him and in this way it became his own. This means that a person should not remain in uncertainty, or that worrying would be a mark of the true faith. This can speak for itself, when we are listening to those preachers who knew what people needed, and also understood how hearts could be comforted with the assurance of their election.

Assurance of Election (2)

Discovery?

It is not wrong to come back for a moment to an expression that we used the last time when we spoke about the discovery, or rediscovery of the doctrine of election by the Reformers. In the strict sense, we cannot keep up this statement. Since the great church father Augustine there is running a line through history, which makes clear that there have been people through all times who have known about God's electing grace in Christ. In order not to forget them completely, we like to bring in this article to the foreground one well-known person as a representative of them all. Luther had often said about him that he had learned the gospel from him. And in a sense that is true. There always have been people within the Roman Catholic Church before the Reformation, and also afterward, who took the position of free grace. Of those, who could be mentioned from the time before the Reformation, Johan von Staupitz is one. He has spoken, preached, and written at more than one occasion about the mystery of election.

We know him from his own writings, also popular ones, which one can consult, whereas at this moment a scientific edition of his publications is in the works.

Luther has honoured him, not only as a pastoral father, to whom he went for advice for his spiritual problems. Luther also appreciated him as head in the monastery, who enabled him to defend his reformational views in the presence of the Augustinian monks. We can thank Von Staupitz for his courageous action, so that Luther could explain in Heidelberg his theology of the cross (1518), at which occasion some later-on well-known South German theologians were won for the Reformation. This was Von Staupitz, the man who had knowledge of God's free grace, although he did not experience the transition to a new church model.

Augustinian Monk

Von Staupitz stood in the tradition, which since Augustine indeed always has been present in the church of the Middle Ages. God's grace meant the same for him as what it meant for the great Gentile apostle, Paul: that God out of free grace decided to save some people out of the human race. In no way did God look at any form of merit for this. Good works are no condition for election. God takes an initiative, because nature, fallen human nature does not have any power which could realize the salvation. The sovereign will of God is the reason for predestination. If this would not have been there, the whole human race would have been lost.

The full confession of this doctrine rests with Von Staupitz on the conviction that Scripture teaches this. But he shrinks back for a consequence that he did not dare to face.

A part of the doctrine of predestination, the predetermination to death, he did not adopt. *"The rejected ones are condemned, not by reason of them not being elected, but because of their sins, in which they die not reconciled. Thus, the rejection is not so much a deed of God's sovereignty, but far more a deed of God's justice. Man as sinner is punished for the sins that he has chosen voluntarily and on his own."*

Johan von Staupitz emphasized the fact that Scripture speaks about an election in Christ. What God has determined from eternity cannot ever be separated from what happens in time, namely, at the cross of Christ. The suffering and death of Christ form the basis of salvation. The work of the atonement in Christ is not separate from the election in Christ.

Furthermore, it is important that the election is an election to sanctification, or to conformity to the image of the Son of God. One could also say that the gracious election has no purpose other than that we enter into communion with Christ. Von Staupitz uses an image that we also encounter with Luther: that of marriage, where a community of goods applies. It is as if we read Luther, in his tract of the freedom of a Christian. In the communion with Christ we share in the benefits of Christ. And

so it not surprising that Luther, when he asked advice from Von Staupitz, got the recommendation to keep his eyes fixed on Christ. Assurance of election is to be found in Christ, and nowhere else.

There was also another thought, which was found in the beginning period of the Reformation with more than one representative: he who is talking about the elect speaks about the believers in Christ. Since this is true, no one can get assurance, but only by adhering to Christ and not by tormenting himself with good works or endless speculations. *This* Von Staupitz has shown Luther the way, although he himself did not fully go in it.

Testimonials of Luther about Johan Von Staupitz

The credit goes to Von Staupitz that he had given Luther the command to go study. At more than one occasion Luther expressed his positive thoughts about his monastery father.

His letters mention his name. At home they often spoke about him at the table. In 1540 Luther said that Von Staupitz was vicar over thirty monasteries of his order. There he brought back the Bible study and he was looking for the best among the monks, whom he ordered to go study in theology. He was behind the establishment of the university at Wittenberg, where he especially wanted to see the emphasis on the study of the Bible. Von Staupitz also took care that Luther was exemption of some duties in the monastery and that he got an assistant, which would provide him with all the smaller tasks. Very well known is that Von Staupitz assisted Luther in the fierce faith struggles that took hold of him. These faith struggles occurred in the time when Luther had to start preaching and give lectures. The most serious temptations affected the question about eternal election. Luther said that Von Staupitz had delivered him from this disease, and that otherwise he would have been burned in hell a long time ago. The way in which Luther was comforted is also known. *“Why do you torture yourself with such speculations? Look at the wounds of Christ and at the blood, shed for us — there you find the predestination. Hold on to the Word made flesh.” “If one wants to argue about predestination, then it would be better not to think about that, but one needs to start at the wounds of Christ and one has to envision Christ clearly and plainly. Then the predestination already has disappeared.”*

These are the sounds, which we later on also notice with the Reformed theologians who followed in the footsteps of Luther. We are touched by the open-mindedness with which they spoke about eternal election in connection with faith, in connection with the atonement, and above all about the security of salvation. About that, D.V., more on a following occasion.

Assurance of Election (3)

A testimony of God’s electing grace

The first witness we hear speak in a very open-minded way about the gracious election of God is the South German Reformer Johannes Brenz. We know him as a good disciple of Luther. He studied in Heidelberg, and in 1518 was there touched by a dispute, held at the university, wherein Luther explained his theology of the cross. From this famous Heidelberg Disputation we have a detailed rendering, which shows us how Luther explained the heart of his theology to an audience at the university and especially to members of his monastery order.

At that occasion also other theologians were won for Luther. Bucer was one of them, also Osiander, whom we know from his later action against Calvin. Also Johan Brenz belonged to these, for Luther won young theologians. The role of Brenz in the history of the Reformation we will leave alone for now. We want to deal with his views about God’s predestination. We can learn about these views from a statement that he wrote in 1527 about the letter of Paul to Ephesus. There the subject of election is mentioned in the first chapter.

It is interesting to hear that this view of Brenz and its original is to be found only in an existing handwritten explanation, in the Vatican Library. In the Thirty Years' War, Heidelberg became a prey of the reviving papacy. The treasures of the library were taken to Rome. And so the manuscript we are dealing with now is under papal supervision in Rome.

In 1935 it was published by W. Köhler, and we are able to take note from a piece of exegesis from the early days of the Reformation, this time not of Luther, Zwingli or Calvin, but from the pen of a different Reformer.

How does Brenz write about the gracious predestination?

In the explanation of the text in Ephesians 1, Brenz puts a strong emphasis on predestination in Christ. *"He chose us in him before the foundation of the world."* Brenz explains that there are many who take offence at predestination. *"Many carnal people are getting scared because of predestination, and they venture to question God their Creator, 'Why have you created me?' But in this place in Scripture their murmuring about predestination is amply weakened."* For he adds: *"he has elected us in this way, not to resist the Lord, and not so that we would live according to our own desires, but that we would be holy and blameless before him through love. The way of predestination was, after all, in such manner that as Christ was from eternity in God's sight, so also was the church of Christ, his body, was together with him. Indeed, the Lamb has been slaughtered since the beginning of the world, and Christ is the same yesterday and today, for all eternity. However, when the world was created, God revealed what was hidden beforehand."*

Clearly Brenz emphasizes the election in Christ. God has known Christ from before the foundation of the world. And in him God saw also his congregation, his body. Since the creation of the world, all of this has been revealed. *"The members of the congregation owe their existence to this, as well as Adam, Abraham, the patriarchs, the righteous ones, until also Christ as Head of the church himself is revealed, and still the members of this body enter into the light until the end of the world, when the completeness of the body will cause the end to come."*

Predestination in Christ means that God not for *one* moment beheld the church of Christ, that is, the true believers, outside of Christ. God always saw Christ in his totality of Head and body. The communion with Christ cannot be shown more intimately.

Comfort of election

If this is really the secret of election in Christ, then it is a matter of enormous comfort. *"This is a tremendous spiritual blessing, because in all adversities we dare to trust, and so to speak, boast against the devil because of this eternal election: the Lord looked after you already, before the world was created, before you even existed. How much the more will he look after you, now that the world has been created and you yourself are there too. But this election also shuts the mouths of all men who speak unjustly, because Paul is saying: so that through love we would be holy and blameless before God. Nobody is innocent – only by faith; no one is holy – only through the Word; whereas he shows this at the same time by a revelation of love. Therefore, he is saying: so that we would be blameless for him in love, that is, so that we will walk in faith and love."*

This extensive quote clearly shows that the assurance of election offers a tremendous comfort, which makes us boast even against the temptations of the devil.

No superficial praise

The way in which Brenz discusses election makes it clear that superficiality is with him out of the question. The Christian does not live easily and cheaply in this world. He is involved in an enormous battle. We cannot and should not deny that either. But stronger than the battle is the power of God. And he also approaches us in the comfort of election.

Brenz is also familiar with the special doubt surrounding election. He is not minimizing that. On the contrary, he talks about the grace of God, which we are allowed to receive in faith. He discusses this with the following quote: *“Does fear grip you, whether you have been elected, come, take the Word, live in accordance with the Word, and you are predestined.”* For that is what we read in Isaiah, *“Behold the hand of the Lord is not shortened, that it cannot save, and his ear dull, that it cannot hear.”*

Predestination teaches us that everything is in God’s hand. It is not a matter of who walks or wishes, but it is a matter of the compassionate God. He desires to save sinners, and therefore we should not let ourselves be restrained from doing good. Rather, we are invited to live according to his will, that is, to the will of him who has the power to save and to destroy.

In a life that subjects itself to God’s will, the consolation of predestination comes to us. Come on! Take the Word and live by the Word, and you are predestined. We were calling this an unprejudiced speaking about God’s election in Christ, founded on the deep conviction of God’s eternal mercy.

Assurance of Election (4)

Election: expression of the completeness of grace

The quiet tone of assurance that we notice in the theology of the Reformation is based on God’s gracious election. We mean with the small series of articles about this nothing else than to make clear that these thoughts were not only to be found with some well-known Reformers.

Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin each in their own way have given proof of this. But beside and with them there were numerous others — for us in many respects unknown theologians — who in their own way gave the same testimony. We learned of the explanation that Johannes Brenz gave on the letter to Ephesus. He encouraged the people by pointing them to the undeserved character of grace. God’s election is nothing else than a powerful support of this reality. God does not consider any form of merit in his act of election. Only whoever accepts this in faith will get to the certainty of faith.

Election functions in exactly the same way in the theological labor of another Reformer. We have in mind Martin Bucer (1491-1551). For the most part he worked in Strasburg, the origin of Reformed Protestantism. From there he worked in almost all of Europe, which he knew through personal contacts, and which he influenced by lots of letters.

Also from Martin Bucer we have a commentary on the letter to the Ephesians. There the theme of election is explicitly addressed. Also here election appears to function as a guarantee of the absolute and undeserved grace. In one of his works he called the doctrine of predestination the final piece of the doctrine of justification. Also with Calvin, in his last edition of the *Institutes* we find that predestination is discussed at this place in the system of doctrine.

Elected before the foundation of the world

From Bucer’s commentary (1527) we will now quote some remarkable portions. To begin with, he emphasizes the fact that in salvation any form of merit is out of the question. Only whoever adheres to this can find the way of assurance and walk in it. Bucer writes about this:

“He chose us before the foundation of the world. He (the apostle Paul) then wanted to instruct us that everything should be attributed to God’s goodness and nothing to our merit. Therefore, he reminds us that this spiritual blessing and these heavenly treasures of the knowledge of God and of the sanctified life for us flow from there, that God before the foundation of the world elected us for this, so that we would be holy and also, in his

judgment, blameless, etc. Because true holiness exists ... through faith and by a life that also before God as judge is free from sinfulness: a life that through love is in service of the wellbeing of others, by which all the commandments of the law are being fulfilled as well. This faith and this life are those spiritual and heavenly treasures, which God works in his own according to his goodwill, when he blesses them. Therefore, God's children share in these things, as Paul clearly is teaching here, because God has elected us for that before the foundations of the world were laid, before we even existed. That is why really nothing can be credited to human abilities when we are talking about holiness and a life that pleases God. But everything needs to be traced back to what we have received as gifts from God's free and gracious election."

Elected in Christ

Bucer lays the basis for the certainty of election in Christ. Hence his explanation of the expression Paul uses, namely, that in Christ we are elected. Therefore, assurance is never to be obtained without Christ. I give here some of Bucer's thoughts in his explanation of this Scripture passage of Paul:

"But this not without a Mediator. For as Christ by his blood has acquired the sanctifying Spirit of the children of God, who also consecrate them to God through faith and by love causes them to live for the neighbor, in this way the saints were written before the foundation of the world in the book of God's children, for the sake of his blood that one day would be shed. For all things are for God present time."

And this is what Paul is saying ... 'He chose us in him.' I have translated: 'through him,' so that it would appear more clearly that Paul attributes our election to the merit of Christ. Perhaps someone wants to understand by this 'in him' that the saints in Christ, that is, as his members, also with him were destined for the holy and glorious life. This meaning does not merely agree with Paul's doctrine, but it also does not differ much from the first explanation we gave. This after all — that God has chosen the saints to the position of his children together with Christ as his members — was theirs likewise because of the merit of Christ the Head. To be elected in Christ, to be endowed with a holy and happy life also is entirely through the merit and grace of Christ, and to be numbered among the elect and to receive from God the ability to live holy and joyfully."

In communion with Christ

It is important to notice that Bucer expresses here the thought of election *"in communion with Christ."* When election itself already occurs for the sake of Christ's work, and also in communion with Christ, then it is no wonder that this idea has an effect on the complete theology of Bucer. Truly, communion with Christ belongs to one of the essential characteristics of Reformed theology. We find it already in the first works of those Reformers who were present at the origin of the Reformed confessions. Only in the union with Christ can we arrive at the firm language of assurance, which we discussed earlier. Also on this we will now give an example. In this example it is clear that assurance is given immediately with faith itself. And we see in it the richness of the perseverance of the saints.

"The perseverance of faith"

"Here we have to observe that which the apostle also wants to impress on us in a very remarkable part of his letter, namely, that all holiness and blessing are ours resulting from the free election of God and the merit of Christ, and not from any work by us. And therefore, whoever really trusts God, which means, whoever is convinced by his Holy Spirit and in a firm hope is looking forward that God will make him righteous and happy, for him it is necessary that he in no way should be concerned to ever be wiped out of the book of the

children of God and lose his faith. It is equally impossible to be erased from God's book and to lose faith, because that would make the intention of God powerless.

To whom it is given to believe, to them it also is given to become children of God (John 1:12) because they are elected to this position before the creation of the world, as it is taught here. What sort of sins could then frustrate eternal election and predestination and convert God's children to children of the devil? Therefore, it would be a delusion of faith and not real faith when one would doubt God's eternal goodwill toward us. It is something different to be a child and heir of God, then at one time to believe it and consequently to deny him."

So much is clear indeed, that Bucer derives an exceptionally strong argument for the assurance of faith from God's gracious election. From there flows a tremendous consolation. From beginning to end we have to attribute everything to God's grace. That provides solid ground.

That it will turn out not to be sandy soil will become clear when we see how this explanation of predestination offers space for the order of salvation. It does not float above our reality. It does end there, for salvation becomes part of our own history. A next time a little more about this DV.

Assurance of Election (5)

Elected for Holiness

God's electing grace has no other purpose than the complete salvation of all his own. One could say that the council of God from eternity is also focused on eternity. Before the foundation of the world there is the resolution of gracious election. This is a matter of eternity. And this resolution contains nothing else than the complete salvation of all those who are chosen in Christ. This is how it then focuses on eternity. To place these matters of salvation thus in the grip of eternity, it has a firmer basis than could have been established by anybody. The merit, the dignity, the willingness and working of man, none of these is taken into consideration. They are meaningless when the eternal salvation of man is at stake. One cannot give salvation a more solid basis than by withdrawing it from human will in this way.

All of this, however, could be life threatening, if it would be covered up. After all, one could then take away all meaning from what is happening in this life. If salvation is a matter of eternity, then events in this world has a complete different value. But has it become without value because of that? We can in a total supralapsarian way just let the greatest decisions come over us from all eternity. But does this not detract from the responsibility of man? And in this way does not antinomianism get a big opportunity?

Supralapsarianism puts all reality into the council of God, without ascribing any constitutive meaning to the reality in which we live. Antinomianism puts a one-sided emphasis on God's mercy, and this results in a kind of indifference in regard to our responsibility and obedience.

Bucer, however, has avoided both dangers. To be sure, election is a matter of eternity. But it finds its cause, when we are talking about the means, in the atonement of the cross. "*Not without a mediator,*" says Bucer, and so eternity becomes known to us in the cross of Christ.

Bucer also emphasizes the mercy, whereby God has adopted us. Election in Christ is an election unto holiness: So that we would be holy and blameless. Thus, election does not hang above the lives of people as an elusive idea. It will become reality in their lives.

Grace Is Not Vain

That Bucer does not erode grace and make it barren becomes very clear from the focus on sanctification, as a life of love for the neighbor. In this way the matters are simplified. In this way grace is not decreased, nor is it eroded or narrowed down. Bucer adheres to the dichotomy of the

law: love God above all and love the neighbor as ourselves. The meaning of it is clear from the following quotation, which I first give and then will try to clarify. Bucer summons us *“to consider ... that it is the mission and office of God’s children that they lead a holy and blameless life in front of God’s countenance ... Holy, which means, we belong to God, as we said, by faith, whereby we become part of the divine nature, devoted to his goodness, from which we have received the taste through his Spirit. However, we are innocent before God when we are totally committed to promoting the good of our neighbor. The law and the prophets demand this preeminently and the new commandment of Christ requires nothing else. That is why Paul adds ‘in love,’ namely, for the neighbor. For this is the test by which the children of the light are distinguished from the children of the darkness. All the other things the hypocrites can pretend, but sincere love for the neighbor, as Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 13, they cannot pretend.”*

Remarkable here is that the practice of godliness becomes very similar to the commandment of love for the neighbour. God by his Spirit makes his children his own. He sanctifies them. They belong to him. Set apart in his services. But this service is given to the neighbour. And it functions as a “test,” a means whereby one can measure the authenticity of faith. It belongs to the marks of election to holiness. The service to the neighbor appears this way in light of the eternity of God’s election.

A strong social element plays a role here. But it is not “socialism”. It simply is living by God’s law in the circumstances of every day. This becomes very clear in the following episode, wherein Bucer puts the children of the light against those of the darkness: *“So long as they are lacking long-suffering, charity, self-denial, the zeal for justice and truth towards all people, the highest forbearance, friendliness and spontaneity; whereas on the other hand there is talk of envy, brutality, pride, contempt for the brothers, inflexibility of the heart, hardness, obstinacy, suspicion and distrust, then it all is meaningless. And so they are no children of God at all. They are anything but endowed with the Spirit, no matter what they pretend, or do, or may have”.*

Eternity applies in time. Especially in a life of devotion to service of the Lord and in serving the neighbour.

Order of Salvation, in Service of Assurance

With Bucer the anchoring of God’s eternal salvation in history gets a special accent in his opinion about the order of salvation. Lots of particulars we are now leaving alone, only to highlight this aspect: God’s salvation looks for a channel in time, also in the singularity of human life. Predestination: a matter of eternity. But realizing itself in time.

Once more Bucer emphasizes the firmness and certainty of this grace for us: *“So that the apostle would convince us with more certainty about the election of God and everything that depends on that as well, he adds that God beforehand has predestined and foreordained the saints, in order that he would adopt them as his children. And therefore: what kind of sin could they fall into that would be so serious that it would cause them to be rejected by the God who does not change and who has from eternity chosen them for life and heirs of salvation?”*

The order of salvation functions here with a twofold purpose. First of all to portray the reality of grace in this life according to the realization to be received in time. But secondly, to show this grace as unity, unity that has a number of aspects, but nevertheless may be considered in its totality. The life of grace is separated in the order of salvation in a number of isolated aspects. It continues in history, which shapes our own life: “One has to consider the order. The first place belongs to God’s election or predestination, then the adoption as children, which is called ‘calling’ as well, namely when the Lord gifted them with his Spirit, and draws unto himself and endows with knowledge those whom he has chosen from eternity. In the third place then follows the sanctification of life and the exercise of the obligation to love, from which good works are forthcoming. When the people see these, they will glorify the heavenly Father through whose goodness these are being done. Thus, as fourth aspect, the righteousness flows forth from the saints whereby the favor of God adorns them, and gives glory to God.”

Bucer still adds that there is no other cause than that of God's eternal mercy, which spreads itself over our life like a sun with many rays: *"But this excellent joy cannot be traced back to any other cause than to the benevolence of God's will and to the merit of Jesus Christ. On account of that merit he loves his own well beloved abundantly, and on behalf of that he loves us too. God has elected us to the rank of his children. He predestined us beforehand. He called us, adopted us, justified and glorified us."*

Assurance of Election (6)

Being Saved out of Grace

Bucer's speaking about the order of salvation especially means, as we have seen, that electing grace in all eternity becomes reality in the life of people here and now. Believers find themselves in this reality. Eternity has woven itself into their lives in the manner of the order of salvation. The concept *order* is especially here in relation to God's providence.

The Reformation spoke about the order of salvation, to indicate that there are a number of relating factors with the realization of salvation. One should distinguish these. One never can separate them from each other.

The concept of the order shows that God has all things under his control. There is even an elegant chain that takes place in our own life. This order especially shows the mercy of God in our lives.

One can give a few examples, from which it is clear that these things are not meant as a psychological road, by which we in our own consciousness become aware of how salvation is appropriated to us. It is not about psychology. Nor is it about chronology, that is, the focus is not on the order of experience, or the manner of application. God himself determines the order, and that is one of perfect grace, executed with assistance by the God-supplied means.

Reformational Common Good

Bucer did not stand alone with this view. The Basel reformer Johannes Oecolampadius spoke in this way about the order of justification as well. In his commentary on Romans 10 he speaks about the way in which people come to the worship of the Name of the Lord. With Oecolampadius we find the following explanation:

"We are saved by divine mercy. For that the apostles are sent out, since this order of justification is given by God, that we would live through his Word. Now pay attention to the degrees of God's mercy. The first form of mercy is that we have apostles. The second that we hear them preach. The third that we believe them. The fourth that we call upon the Name of the Lord. The fifth is being saved, and this is the highest degree, where we cannot arrive at without the others."

It is possible to give numerous quotations, wherein it becomes clear that the *order* relates to the decision of God to grant salvation in this way, and not any other. Also in other instances Oecolampadius speaks about the order of salvation: these are the degrees of God's mercy.

The Concise Order of Salvation

Bucer speaks in response to the well-known text, *"By grace you have been saved,"* also about the *order of salvation*. Now I first present the quotation. It is as follows: *"The order of our justification and our salvation is here really as brief as possible, and yet very clearly described. From this, nothing is our own. Nothing gets accomplished by us and our strength. All of us who believe in Christ are saved already, because we are members of Christ. We started to have fellowship with Christ in his life and glory. But how did we become partakers of this blessing? By virtue of the*

undeserved goodwill of God, by which he at first has adopted us, while we still were enemies. Where will this be manifested, while we still struggle with sin and guilt, and with the evil resulting from that? This happiness has not yet fully come to light in us, as we have already mentioned before.”

So here everything depends on faith. Unmerited grace it is. Instead of the word “grace,” Bucer invariably uses the word “goodwill.” Thus the goodwill of God is indicated; that is to say, the goodwill that has been his from eternity and from where all blessings flow forth. God reveals his goodwill in the gospel. The gospel gets proclaimed and is received by faith in the hearts of believers. Also faith is not based on merit. It does not carry any deserving power. Faith lives by the grace of election. Bucer clearly marks the course of events and life by faith in the following passage:

By Faith We Are Saved

“For by faith through which we believe the gospel, we are saved. It is a firm foundation for the things we hope for and an evidence for the things that are not visible. And therefore, we expect that the Lord sanctifies us, as he has promised us in the gospel, and at the last day will raise us to a glorious immortality. As a pledge for that he gave his Spirit, through whom we believe that it will happen this way. Through him we also call upon God as our Father in sure confidence. And we are expecting patiently that he will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body (Phil. 3:21).

What he (Paul) says now further, that we are saved by faith, should in no way be interpreted as if we would deserve salvation, and as it were could arrange it for ourselves. But it means that we thereby embrace salvation, decreed by the free election of God, and bestowed by his benevolence. For by faith the beginning of salvation is worked in us. By faith we are transferred from the multitude of lost people to the flock of the elect. For until we believed, also we ourselves were lost like the rest, because we were without God. But when we, convinced by the Holy Spirit, believe the gospel of the kingdom, we are embracing the goodwill that is promised therein and actually are made partakers of it. Because we believe the promising God, this guarantees without any doubt the partaking, which entails the deliverance of all evil and the possession of everything good. We are thus saved by faith, because this is how we learn to know God’s goodness toward us and are ensured that one day we will receive it completely. Then we are saved altogether. But rightly he (Paul) added: ‘and this is not from you, it is the gift of God. Not by works, so that no one could boast.’ For if God by virtue of his goodwill does not grant his Spirit to someone, then this person, as someone who never has believed the gospel, will also remain cut off into eternity from divine goodwill and salvation. And therefore, nothing of this comes from us. Nothing is due to our works. But everything exists by virtue of his election and goodwill. Only therefore he endowed us with his Spirit, through whom he renews our heart and adopts us as his children, because according to our nature we are children of wrath and destruction.”

W van’t Spijker

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