

“The Biblical Importance of the Doctrine of Preterition”  
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One of the gravest symptoms of the revision movement in the Presbyterian Church today consists in the absence of serious appeal to scriptural authority for the changes of confessional statement that are advocated. From the attitude assumed by man, one would be led to think that no longer the infallible Word of God, but public sentiment, the so-called Christian consciousness, has become the recognized rule of faith among us. Consequently there is reason to fear that the spirit in which revision is sought forebodes greater evil to the church than any material modifications of the creed to which revision may lead. Even if the Calvinistic system of doctrine embodied in our standards were seriously mutilated in result of the present movement, so long as the great body of believers feel themselves in conscience bound to yield unquestioning faith to the Bible, there is always hope for a rehabilitation of the principles temporarily abandoned. But when once the sense of allegiance to the Word of God as the only authoritative rule of faith has become weakened, or, while still recognized in theory has ceased to be a living force in the minds of believers, then the hope of a return to the truth once forsaken is reduced to a minimum.

Among the elements of Calvinistic belief now under attack on account of the popular disfavor into which they have fallen, the doctrine of preterition occupies a conspicuous place. So far as we are aware it is seldom asserted openly that this doctrine must go because it has no basis in the Scripture. The worst that thoughtful and theologically informed minds venture to say against it is that it represents but a logical inference from other truths and that in such delicate matters the church may well content itself with summarizing the direct utterances of the Word of God, leaving it to the science of theology to draw the further inferences from these primary data. Even such a statement, however, utterly fails to do justice to the biblical facts. It is true that the Bible also teaches the principle of preterition, by way of implication, as a corollary of certain other fundamental doctrines. No more is necessary than to combine the two single truths, that all saving grace, inclusive of faith, is the supernatural gift of God, and that not all men are made recipients of this gift, to perceive immediately that the ultimate reason why some are saved and others passed by can lie in God alone. In so far every confession which adheres to these two primary facts—and no Calvinistic confession could for a moment hesitate to do so—is also bound to imply the doctrine of preterition. But the Scriptures give us much more than indirect warrant for upholding the principle here at issue. In the first place, it should be observed that the absoluteness with which the Bible subsumes all events under the sovereign decree of God extends to sinful developments as well as to the morally good activities of men, and that consequently the human unbelief of the gospel which prevents the salvation of many is as truly subject to a divine decree as the faith by which others are saved. No matter whether we call this decree an act of preterition, or give it some other name, the general Bible doctrine on the all-comprehensiveness of the divine decree forces us to recognize it as a reality.

In the second place, the Scriptures speak in particular terms of that part of the divine decree which has specific reference to the non-salvation of some, terms as strong and unequivocal as any that are used to describe the corresponding act which appoints men unto salvation. It is easy to be misled on this point by the scarcity of biblical statements representing the decree of preterition as an eternal act in the mind of God, especially within the limits of the Old Testament. But a moment's reflection will show that this applies equally much to the Old Testament doctrine of election. Both election

and preterition are by preference viewed in the Old Testament as they emerge in the actual control of the issues of history. It is God acting in result of His eternal will, rather than willing in advance of His temporal act what this stage of revelation describes to us. Keeping this in mind, we perceive that preterition is as frequently and as emphatically spoken of as its counterpart not only in national and collective relations, but also with reference to individuals, sometimes with so little attempt at guarding against possible misapprehensions that the appearance results as if the decree somehow were the efficient cause of unbelief instead of merely permitting and controlling it for its own holy ends as it really does. In the New Testament, while the historical mode of viewing the decree as passing over into realization is not abandoned, the eternal background of the same, as it exists above all time, an ideal world in God, is more clearly revealed.

In the third place, the Bible still more pointedly calls attention to the necessary place which preterition occupies in the general decree of God pertaining to salvation, when it defines the act of predestination with eternal life, as is one of its fundamental aspects an elective act by which certain persons are singled out from among a number of individuals. The specific sense of both the Hebrew and Greek terms rendered by "election" results from the prominence they both give to the element of discrimination implied in the divine choice. While, therefore, predestination as the appointment to the goal of eternal salvation can be logically conceived without the correlate of preterition, it is different with the idea of election. This idea is of such a nature that it cannot even be completed in thought without positing at the same time the idea of preterition. For this reason it is an utterly futile endeavor to attempt to construe a formula which shall adequately reproduce the scriptural doctrine of election, and yet leave unexpressed the correlated doctrine of preterition. This becomes specially significant in view of the fact that the term "election" strongly preponderates over all others in the scriptural references to the decree of salvation. In a divine revelation, where nothing is insignificant, there must be assumed to exist a special motive for the preference thus given to one among the many terms that stood at the Holy Spirit's disposal. In other words, if the Bible thinks it necessary to teach us not merely that Christians are predestined by free grace into eternal salvation, but also thinks it necessary persistently to remind us how this appointment of some into life took place from among a number of others who were sovereignly passed by, then this can only mean that in the view of God the principle of preterition is essential to the expression of the most important aspect of the decree of salvation.

Nor does the Bible leave us in doubt as to why such great practical importance for our instruction is attached by God to the discriminating element in predestination. The motive is none other than to impress most profoundly upon the mind of believers the conviction of the absolutely gracious character of their redemption. No stronger way of bringing this out is conceivable than by showing in actual experience that under entirely equal conditions, as viewed from the human standpoint, one man is saved, another is left unsaved in his sin. To use the classical statement of the Apostle Paul on this very same problem (Rom. 9:11f.): "For the children being not yet born, neither having done anything good or bad, that the elective purpose of God might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth, it was said unto her, the elder shall serve the younger." This is far from saying that the motive here disclosed is the only one that determines God in the mysterious act of election. There may be many other motives, all equally wise and holy, entering into His choice and which it has not pleased Him to reveal to our finite understanding. But this one motive He has made known to us, and thereby also indirectly taught us, that whatever other reasons for His sovereign decree may exist, they

can have nothing to do with anything meritorious possessed by one man above another. Thus the sole purport of the doctrine of preterition as presented to our faith in the Scriptures is the exaltation of the grace of God. Can a church which professes preeminently to uphold the gospel of free grace refuse to echo this part of God's revelation in her confession? And can it be safe for any church to erase from her creed a mode of expressing the divine grace, which God Himself has used to instruct us, on the plea that she deems its use unpopular and inexpedient? Shall man be wiser than God?