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The Voice Crying in the Wilderness (4)

The message declared by the voice crying in the wilderness is summarized by the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3-5, which is quoted in Luke 3:4-6: “As it is written in the book of the words of Esaias the prophet, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

The imagery here is that of a great king travelling in his royal chariot to part of his realm. But the road is poor, for it is crooked and bumpy, with many hills and dips. The way must be fixed since the sovereign is coming. Level it, straighten it and fill in the potholes!

Who is the coming One? Luke 3:4 refers to Him as the “Lord,” who is Jehovah, rendered “LORD” in Isaiah 40:3, which also identifies him as “God.” Thus, Jehovah God is coming! This proves the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity incarnate.

Luke 3:6 calls Him not merely our Saviour but “the salvation of God.” This fits perfectly with the annunciation of the angel Gabriel: “thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21).

Isaiah 40:5 hails Him as “the glory of the LORD.” Thus, the message of John the Baptist is centred on the glory of God revealed in Jesus Christ and His salvation.

What did John the Baptist command? He commanded the people to prepare the way for the coming king, like those who fix the road before the visit of the sovereign. They were to prepare the way for Jesus Christ, who is the LORD, Jehovah salvation, the glory of God.

But what is it to prepare the way of the Lord? What is the truth conveyed by this attractive imagery? It is summed up in one word: Repent! Matthew 3:2 encapsulates John’s message: “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

What is repentance? First, repentance is a radical change of mind and thinking with regard to ethical and divine things. You no longer imagine yourself to be a good person, for you realize your own sinfulness. As regards your works, you discover that they are not virtuous, never mind meritorious, for they are all “filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6). You understand that Almighty God is infinitely holy and not to be trifled with. You see that your security is not to be found in external religious observances or mere church connections. It finally grips you that you deserve to perish in hell for your sins.

Second, true repentance results in fleeing from the wrath to come, in the language

(continued on p. 4)

of Luke 3:7. The sinner is gripped with a fear of divine judgment and punishment. He no longer loves and rejoices in evil attitudes, speech and deeds, but hates and detests his iniquities as evil that deserves God’s wrath. Thus he earnestly turns from his transgressions, and seeks salvation and eternal life in the cross of Christ.

Third, true repentance issues in confession of sin (Matt. 3:6). No longer do you excuse your iniquity, but you confess sin *as sin*, worthy of God’s righteous judgment. With grief and sorrow, sins are confessed to God and, where appropriate, to those whom you have wronged or to the church (*Westminster Confession* 15:6).

Fourth, true repentance brings forth good fruit, what John the Baptist calls “fruits worthy of repentance” (Luke 3:8). Where there is repentance, there is always faith, for these two are inseparable so that you cannot have one without the other. Faith and repentance are produced by regeneration, the new birth, which makes the tree, and therefore its fruit, good, to use the language of the Lord Jesus (Matt. 7:17-18; 12:33, 35). Thus, those who are really repentant bring forth good fruit: they break with sin, they live according to all God’s commandments in principle, they are humble before God and man, they produce good works, they persevere in the truth and they suffer for righteousness’ sake by the irresistible grace of the Holy Spirit. Where there is no good fruit, there is no real repentance, merely hypocrisy.

Fifth, there is an important connection between repentance and baptism, both real, inner baptism and external, ritual baptism with water. This is the testimony of Luke 3:3, concerning John the Baptist’s ministry: “And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” John proclaimed an inward, spiritual baptism which renewed God’s elect people so that they would be brought infallibly to repentance and receive the forgiveness of all their sins. This spiritual transformation and acquittal was signified and sealed in water baptism.

In John’s day, the kingdom of God was at hand, so he called people to repent and so prepare for the (first) coming of Christ. In our day, the kingdom of God has come, with the incarnation, cross and victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Those outside the kingdom must repent and be converted, humbling themselves as little children to enter the kingdom of heaven, and those who are already citizens of God’s kingdom must continue in the way of repentance and faith (Matt. 18:3-4; Col. 2:6)!

This is the first of Martin Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses*: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Matt. 4:17), He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” This was also the message of John the Baptist, as we have seen, and it is and must be the preaching of the true church today!

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God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will (1)

One correspondent writes, "Do you realize that God has no foreknowledge outside His creation? He can't have foreknowledge of His own actions. Remember, He had no beginning and foreknowledge only exists prior to a beginning."

Although the question proceeds on a misconception and has an air of arrogance about it, when it suggests that those who believe in God's foreknowledge really do not understand what foreknowledge is, the question is worth our consideration.

Another questioner has obviously given the matter considerable thought, but continues to have some problems with the idea of foreknowledge. He writes,

"I understand the passages about 'before the foundation of the world' in the light of foreknowledge.

1. What is that foreknowledge? For those He foreknew. What did God foreknow?

2. If the elect are chosen before the foundation of the world outside of foreknowledge of the individual, then, at what point were they ever condemned? I do not see how one can be simultaneously condemned and saved at the same time.

"As Moses raised up the serpent—

1. Numbers 21:8-9, I am sure we will agree that Christ Himself used this passage as a picture of what He was doing on the cross [John 3:14]. Well, in this picture, all of the people that were bitten had to use their free will and simply looked upon the serpent to live, and all who didn't died. How can this be a picture of Christ in the Calvinist eye, when looking is an act of conscience and of will?

2. This cannot be an accurate picture, if the consequences are not applied in the same manner.

3. The serpent was never kept away from those who were bitten so that [they] would never be able to look upon it. If salvation is not available to those who are bitten, then it is not an accurate picture."

This last question does not have foreknowledge in mind, but it is so closely related to the subject of foreknowledge that it is well to treat the two together.

First of all, we ought to be sure of what the Bible means by "foreknowledge."

The word is not frequently used in Scripture. It is found only in Acts 2:23 and I Peter 1:2. Its verb cognate, "foreknow," is used only in Romans 8:29 and Romans 11:2.

In Acts 2:23, the word is used to teach us that Christ's death and all the circumstances of it were brought about by God's sovereign and eternal counsel. The word "foreknowledge" is, in fact, identified with His counsel.

In the other three instances, the word is used in relation to God's people: "For *whom* he did foreknow, he also did predestinate;" "*Elect* according to the foreknowledge of God the Father;" "God hath not cast away *his people* which he foreknew."

Although foreknowledge is distinguished from both predestination and election, it is closely associated with both concepts.

In the Middle Ages, many theologians, committed as they were to the Pelagianism

of Rome, defined foreknowledge in the sense of prediction. God was able to predict accurately who would, by his own free will, believe, and, on the basis of man's own decision to believe, he was elected. The Reformers, without exception, condemned this view as being contrary to the Scriptures and a denial of God's sovereignty.

But the heresy arose again. It arose in the hypothetical universalism of the Amyraldians in France and in the Arminian heresy of Jacobus Arminius and his followers in the Netherlands. Amyraldianism was condemned in the *Formula Consensus Helvetica* (1675) and by the Westminster Assembly (1640s), although the Amyraldian position or views like it were defended by a few delegates. The Arminian position was condemned by the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619).

The confessions that arose out of the Reformation are unanimously opposed to a conditional predestination and man's free will. The *Scottish Confession* (1560) says, "So that the cause of good works we confess to be not our free will, but the Spirit of the Lord Jesus ..." (Art. 13). Regarding free will, Article 10 of the *Thirty-Nine Articles* (1562/63) of the Church of England states, "The condition of man, after the fall of Adam, is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself by his own natural strength and good works to faith and calling upon God." The *Lambeth Articles* (1595), intended to be added to the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, though never officially adopted by the Anglican Church, is strong on the doctrine of predestination (www.cprf.co.uk/articles/lambeth.htm). All the other Reformed confessions teach the same truth: the *French Confession* (1559), the *Belgic Confession* (1561), the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563), etc.

It is faithfulness to the confessions to confess and maintain these truths, and to oppose the heresies that basically arose out of Rome. That most of the church today is unfaithful to her heritage makes no difference; these churches have simply repudiated what lies at the heart of Reformation thought. In doing so, they have rejected Zwingli, Luther, Calvin, Knox and all the later Reformed theologians. Defenders of later heresies must not come up with their denials of foreknowledge, predestination and election, along with their notions of free will and attempt to palm this off on the church as the truth of the Scriptures. Let them do their homework and read Luther's *The Bondage of the Will* or Calvin's *God's Eternal Predestination and Secret Providence*. They will soon learn that they stand outside the stream of biblical thought.

If they claim that the Reformation came with novelties, let them go back to Augustine (354-430) and Gottschalk (c. 808-c. 867) to learn that these are ancient truths held by the churches' greatest theologians.

The only explanation for this consistent emphasis on God's foreknowledge and the bondage of the will of man is that these doctrines that the Reformers taught are thoroughly scriptural and must be maintained.

We will enter into the subject itself more completely in the next article and answer some of the objections of the gainsayers. I urge our readers to save this issue of the *News* so that you can refer to it when the next issue comes out to refresh your memories of the questions we are dealing with.

Prof. Hanko