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THE THREE CAUSES OF SALVATION.

BY REV. W. W. MOORE, D. D.,

*Professor of Hebrew and Literature in Union Theological
Seminary, Virginia.*

“Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures.”—JAMES i. 18.

THIS is one of the most comprehensive statements in the Bible. It outlines the whole scheme of redemption. As the acorn contains the oak in embryo, so this text in its small compass contains the whole substance of divine revelation concerning the divine activity, method and purpose in the work of human redemption, not in full development, of course, but in germ. It tells us at once the source, and the means, and the purpose of our salvation from sin. It tells us the *source* of our salvation: “Of his own will begat he us.” It tells us the *means* of our salvation: “With the word of truth.” And it tells us the *object* of our salvation: “That we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures.”

Philosophical writers are accustomed to distinguish three kinds of cause. They make a distinction between what they call the efficient cause, the instrumental cause, and the final cause of any effect. The distinction is a good one, and will be of value to us in the interpretation of this text. The efficient cause is the power that produces the result, and without which the result cannot be produced. The instrumental cause is the means by which the power is applied. And the final cause is the object contemplated in producing the effect.

For instance, in the locomotion of a train of cars, the efficient cause of the motion is steam, the instrumental cause is the engine with its appliances of cylinder, piston, driver, and other machinery for bringing the power to bear, and the final cause is the transportation of passengers or produce. In writing a letter the efficient cause of the letter is the person who writes it, the instrumental cause is the pen with which it is written, and the final cause is the object for which it is written, such as communication with a friend, or the transaction of business. In felling a tree the efficient cause of its fall is the woodman who chops it, the instrumental cause is the axe which cuts it, and the final cause is the purpose for which it is cut, fuel, or lumber, or what not.

These three kinds of cause enter into the work of human redemption, and in the text before us we have a statement of what John Calvin has well called the efficient cause, the instrumental cause, and the final cause of our salvation.

I. *The efficient cause*: "Of his own will begat he us." The person referred to is God. The power that regenerates a human soul is nothing less than divine power. And this power is exercised according to his sovereign pleasure, unmoved by any external cause. There are some who teach that man is the efficient cause of his own salvation. These misunderstand the Scriptures. The only efficient cause of salvation is God. This is shown conclusively by the terms used in the Bible to describe the condition of man before regeneration, as well as by the terms which are used to describe the process of regeneration itself. Hear this statement of the Apostle Paul in his epistle to the Ephesians: "You hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sin; wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, accord-

ing to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience; among whom also we all had our conversation in time past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath even as others. But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even *when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ (by grace ye are saved)*: and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Jesus Christ: that in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. *For by grace are ye saved through faith: and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.*"

Observe the force of these terms. "*Dead* in trespasses and sins." Can the dead work? Can a man effect his own salvation? It were as reasonable to suppose that one of these quiet sleepers in our silent city of the dead could, by his own inherent power, rise from the grave and resume his wonted activities among us as to suppose that a being who is dead in trespasses and sins can work out his own deliverance therefrom. And so the apostle writes to Titus: "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost, which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, that being justified by his grace we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life." Further, this great change is described by the apostle in the passage quoted from Ephesians as a *creation*; we are said to be "God's workmanship created

anew in Christ Jesus unto good works." The good works follow, they do not precede, regeneration. It were as reasonable to suppose that a mere man could, by the word of his power, speak a universe into existence with its suns and systems and living creatures as to suppose that a sinner could be the efficient cause of his own salvation. The same truth is taught by our Saviour in his conversation with Nicodemus, where he says, "Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." It is taught there even more emphatically than appears in the English Version, for, as the marginal reading shows, the original says, "Except a man be born *from above* he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John iii. 3.) And so the Apostle John, "As many as received him to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." The argument of the Apostle James in the passage before us proves the same thing. He is showing his readers that all the evil which afflicts us comes from our own depraved hearts, but all the good which we enjoy comes from God. "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man; but every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is full grown, bringeth forth death. Do not err, my beloved brethren. 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." The crowning proof of it is that "of his own will begat he us," unmoved by anything meritorious in man's character or conduct. (James i. 13-18.) This is

a specially important statement as coming from the Apostle James, for he has been supposed by some to teach the doctrine of salvation by works, in contradiction of the Apostle Paul, who teaches everywhere that a man is "justified by faith alone, without the deeds of the law." Even Martin Luther seems to have been under this impression at one time, and he spoke of the epistle of James as an epistle of straw. But there is no contradiction. It is simply the old story of the two knights who were approaching each other, and saw a shield suspended over the road. "What a beautiful golden shield," said one. "It is not golden," said the other, "it is silver." The first knight insisted upon his view, the second continued to deny, and as they were about to pass from the clash of words to the clash of swords, a white-robed figure, whose name was Truth, rushed between them and required them to change places, and lo! the shield was golden on the one side and silver on the other. So in regard to Paul and James. There is no real contradiction between them. The difficulty is solved by understanding the point of view of each. Paul is right; we are justified by faith alone. James is right; we are justified only by a working faith. But without pausing to dwell upon the manner of reconciling the apparent difference, let us note that there is nowhere in Scripture, not even in the writings of Paul, a stronger statement of the absolute sovereignty and sole efficiency of God in salvation than is here made by the apostle who has been supposed by some to teach that a man is justified by his own good works. The efficient cause of salvation is God: "Of his own will begat he us."

II. *The instrumental cause*: "With the word of truth." It is not denied that God sometimes regenerates a soul

without the intervention of means. But his rule, well-nigh universal, excepting, for instance, such cases as infants and idiots, is to use means. And the means that he uses is the word of truth. The Apostle Peter speaks of believers as "born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever." The Apostle Paul reminds Timothy that "from a child thou hast known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." And in the twenty-first verse of the chapter before us the Apostle James exhorts his readers to "receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls." Some of the truths of this word which God uses as means of salvation are these: That the original condition of man as God created him was one of knowledge, righteousness, and holiness; that man fell from the estate in which he was created by sinning against God; that all men are sinners, guilty, polluted, and helpless; "that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life"—facts, warnings, invitations, promises.

But let us now note the relation between these two causes, the efficient and the instrumental. There is no intrinsic efficiency in the word for regeneration without the spirit. As a pen is powerless to write a letter, as an axe is powerless to fell a tree, unless there be an agent to wield it, as an engine cannot move cars without steam, so the word is powerless without the creative spirit of God. "There are two conditions necessary for the production of a given effect. The one is that the cause should have the requisite efficiency; and the other, that the object on which it acts should have the requisite susceptibility." The sun and rain shed their genial in-

fluences on a desert, and it remains a desert ; when these influences fall on a fertile plain it is clothed with all the wonders of vegetable fertility and beauty. The mid-day brightness of the sun has no more effect on the eyes of the blind than a taper ; and if the eye be bleared the clearest light only enables it to see men as trees walking. It is so with moral truth : no matter what may be its inherent power, it fails of any salutary effect unless the mind to which it is presented be in a fit state to receive it. The minds of men since the fall are not in a condition to receive the transforming and saving power of the truths of the Bible ; and therefore it is necessary, in order to render the word of God an effectual means of salvation, that it should be attended by the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit. The apostle says, expressly, "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God ; for they are foolishness unto him : neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." An eminent Presbyterian minister of New York city says that when he was a youth he attended a certain religious service and heard a sermon on the subject of regeneration, in which the preacher stated that conversion consisted of two things : first, a recognition of himself as a sinner, and secondly, a recognition of Christ as a Saviour. The gentleman says he left the church with an unsatisfied feeling in his mind, and as he walked homeward, those words, learned in early boyhood, came back to him with great clearness and force of meaning : "Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, *and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.*" The preacher to whom he had been listening had omitted from his defini-

tion the most vital point. Let us not refuse to accept the whole truth of the Bible concerning our helplessness as sinners and God's sole efficiency in our salvation, even though it expose us for a time to the underserved charge of teaching fatalism.

Having now defined the efficient cause of our salvation, and the instrumental cause, let us look, lastly, at III. *The final cause*: "That we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." Under the old dispensation, the firstfruits of the harvest and of the vintage, of the flocks and of the herds, and even the firstborn of their own families, were by the Hebrews given to God. On the day after the Passover Sabbath every year, a sheaf of the first ripe barley of that season's crop was waved by the priest before the Lord as an offering, and as an expression of gratitude, dependence and devotion, and by this consecration of the firstfruits the entire produce was consecrated. In like manner they did with the first loaves made from the new grain fifty days later at the feast of Pentecost, and so of the best wine and the best oil. The firstlings of their flocks and herds also were given to God as victims for sacrifice. In accordance with the same principle, and in special commemoration of the mercy of God in sparing their households when he inflicted the tenth plague upon the Egyptians, the firstborn son of every Israelitish family was devoted to God as a minister of the sanctuary. The Lord afterwards substituted the Levites for the firstborn in the service of the tabernacle, in order, no doubt, to the more orderly conduct of public worship; and the overplus of firstborn sons for whom there were no Levites to substitute had to be redeemed from the service of the sanctuary by the payment of five shekels apiece into the tabernacle treasury. The great idea, then, connected

with the firstfruits was that of consecration, absolute devotion to the service of God, and when James says that "of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, *that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures,*" he meant the same thing, to-wit, that the object of our salvation is consecration to the service of God, and that our regeneration is a pledge of the ultimate regeneration of the world at large.

For what purpose, then, are sinners saved? That they may finally escape the punishment due them for their sins? Yes, but that is secondary. That they may finally attain to the happiness of heaven? Yes, but that is secondary. The primary object of our salvation is consecration to God's service. I once heard the late Bishop Kavanaugh, of the Methodist Church, say that he had always greatly admired the first question and answer of *The Shorter Catechism* of the Westminster Assembly: "What is the chief end of man?" "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever." And truly they are among the noblest uninspired words ever written. Some forty years ago there was an infidel editor in this country, who used to make shallow sport of this great statement; but it is the worthiest answer ever yet given to that momentous question. What, then, is the chief end of a sinner's salvation? To glorify God by a life of whole-hearted consecration to his service.

It is said that when Oliver Cromwell visited Westminster, in England, he saw in one of the apartments statues of the twelve apostles in silver. "Who are those fellows there?" he inquired, in his brusque way, as he approached them. On being informed, he replied: "Take them down, and let them go about doing good." They were taken down, and melted, and coined into money, and went about the commonwealth doing good

as money. It has been well asked, "Are there not some Christians who occupy places in God's house more for show than for service? Stately, formal, disinclined to work for God, though doubtless his own children, sinners go unsaved, and believers go uncomforted and unhelped, for all the effort they make to aid them. They need to be melted down and sent about doing good. Statuary Christians, however burnished and elegant they may be, are of little real service in the cause of Christ." They have misapprehended the final cause of their salvation. They seem to have forgotten the second part of that great statement in the second chapter of Titus, where we are told that Jesus Christ "gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works."

My brethren, let us bear these things in mind. It is well for us to remember by whom we are saved, and by what we are saved, and for what we are saved. It is well for us to recognize in our salvation the power of God as the source, and the word of God as the means, and the glory of God as the end; for "of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures."