

In Defence of Our Reformed Heritage

Andrew Clarke

critically reviews:

Election and Predestination

by Samuel Fisk B.A., M.A.

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Monotonous in it's format, and, to my mind, monstrous in it's theology, this book mounts a sustained attack upon Calvinism. It's title is a misnomer, both doctrines being denied, or at least mangled beyond recognition. The salesman blurb on the cover declares "You are not about to read the views of one author alone". A hyperbolic understatement indeed! It is an agglomeration of quotes from known and less known theologians whom he supposes support his views. To me, Mr. Fisk seems like a Russian army General. Massed, even if inaccurate, firepower seems to be the tactic employed. He relies upon the quantity, not quality, of argument. Then, also noteworthy is the fact that the book's promoters are certainly such as have Arminian predilections, 'Moody Monthly' - for instance says they "highly recommend" the book. But let us consider his points, such as they are.

The first chapter is a psychological attempt at persuading the reader to lay aside reason and logic. Almost forty fairly large quotations are made over the course of fifteen pages. Each one is heralded by a lauding of the intellectual credits of the quoted authors; apparently one is to trust their theology on the bases of their ability. Each of these sets forth the so-called paradox theory. This could be deduced from the headline of Chapter One: "Two concepts to be recognised." The second page sets the tone of the whole work. We are informed that the religious thoughts of both Calvinists and Arminians are found in the Bible. Both are "wholly true", although they appear to contradict each other and cannot be explained in terms of one another. This is seriously offered as the intellectual basis on which to accept his book! Obviously, Mr Fisk is attempting the tightrope trick. Like modern politics, modern theology attempts to be 'all things to all people'. The uninitiated reader

would be left with the impression the author is firmly interjacent between the two extremes, or even holding to both.

This is a dangerous course to follow. As we shall see, not only is the theology contradictory, but different theologians, when quoted, make conflicting assertions. At the outset, however, the author is content to simply make bald assertions without any attempt at proof. We are told: "The soul's election depends upon the souls choice ... It is not settled in Heaven; it is settled on earth. It is not settled of the Lord; it is settled by man" (pg. 15, W.B. Riley). This is a precis of the position taken on election in this book. Our dear and comforting doctrine, by it's nature sovereign, unconditional and gracious, is denied in every way possible. He denies that it is personal and individual; he denies that it refers to salvation or eternal life (but to merely some sort of honour); and he denies that it is effectual. He would seem to prefer the term 'foreknowledge', and compares, nigh-sacrilegiously, God's electing with viewing a film twice and thereby on the second viewing being able to anticipate what will occur next.

A complete chapter is devoted to the subject of foreknowledge. At first Fisk asks: can God foreknow something without causing it? At this point I became rather excited. Perhaps, seventy-two pages in, the issues would be dealt with. It was quite an anticlimax then to observe the answer, or rather non-answer. The questioner is dismissed as 'extreme', the question as 'philosophically conditioned' and eleven pages of quotations ensue. Again, these are simply assertions agreeing with the author, all failing to even attempt a proper answer. To his variety of election, Fisk also attaches conditions, thereby incorporating the work of man. The true Biblical doctrine, on the other hand, is dismissed as: "the revolting doctrine that God has predestined a definite number of mankind to eternal life" (pg. 46, italics mine).

Indeed, either explicitly or implicitly, every one of the 'Five points of Calvinism' are denied. Next to be targeted is total depravity. He claims to hold it, even enshrining it as "sound biblical doctrine". Yet, far from being sound or Biblical, his belief is not even 'total'. He deploys the traditional strategy in attempting to dilute this teaching while maintaining that he actually holds it. Sin pervades all of man's faculties, but only partially - "total depravity in man does not mean his total inability". This of course, is to argue for the validity of the notion of man's free will. Man is not dead; he is able to do good, able to reach for salvation, able to believe. Thus ensured is the rejection of the doctrine of irresistible grace. On page 53 he says: "God is limited by human freedom ... God must reduce His own action to the minimum lest he compel the will ... Jesus could do no mighty works because of the unbelief of the people. Unbelief hindered him. Unbelief fettered Him, even Christ Jesus, the Lord."

These are staggering, even frightening concepts. Does Mr Fisk really worship a God servile in the chains of human freedom, will and sin? Has man degenerated into an uncontrollable parody of the monster in 'Frankenstein,' thwarting the purposes of his Creator? But these statements also make it impossible consistently to

believe in the preservation of the saints. In the Scriptures, Christ and his church are often compared to a shepherd and his sheep. Try applying the doctrines mentioned above to this everyday example. Surely the poor wandering sheep are only kept within the fold by the shepherd's caring hand? I have a suspicion that were he to laze around watching One Man And His Dog (reducing his 'action to the minimum'), his flock would be somewhat diminished. Instead he works, constantly guarding against the different traps and dangers which could beset his sheep. So with salvation. History constantly reveals the hand of God intervening to preserve his church. Indeed if one really believes that God reduces his action to the minimum among men (which would be to do nothing), you would inevitably end up believing in a mechanical, 'wound-up' creation, as several prominent American Presidents have believed.

Limited atonement is of course anathema to Fisk. On page 149 it is asserted that Christ died not only for those who will be in heaven but also "for all those who finally will be in hell". The consequences of such a belief are horrifying. It assaults the very efficacy of Christ's death. It makes those drops of blood shed but a vanity, those agonising pains a futile waste. Christ's death did not secure a place in heaven for as much as one person. He could have died and no one would have been redeemed had they found it inconvenient. All the more harrowingly then does Christ's cry of pathos hauntingly echo, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

Why, indeed, Mr Fisk? Does the death of Christ satisfy for sin? All sin? Including unbelief? If so, for what, even as I write, are people being punished in Hell? The section on limited atonement has an appendix on the views of Spurgeon upon the matter. He is enlisted to shore up the author's position. It is not my purpose to dissect the views of Spurgeon, this having been done in other BRF publications. It is interesting, however, to note that here, as in many other cases, the quotation does not actually prove that which it is purported to do. The quotation, as follows, is at best ambiguous. "In Christ's finished work I see an ocean of merit; my plummet finds no bottom, my eye discerns no shore. There must be sufficient efficacy in the blood of Christ, if God had so willed it, to have saved not only all the world, but all in ten thousand worlds, had they transgressed their Master's law. Once admit infinity into the matter and limit is out of the question. Having a divine Person for an offering, it is not consistent to conceive of limited value; bound and measure are terms inapplicable to the divine sacrifice. The intent of the divine purpose fixes the application of the infinite offering, but does not change it into a finite work." But Spurgeon also believes firstly that God does not will to save everyone, and that the atonement is fixed to a decreed body. Mr Fisk would reject both of these beliefs. Note also that Spurgeon is writing hypothetically, often a speculative and dangerous task - he does not say that everyone is able to be saved, merely that God could have saved them had he wished. In this scenario of a conditionally universal salvation, Christ's death alone would be sufficient for all. If Spurgeon is

agreeing with the author, then the London preacher must have had the misfortune to suffer from periodic memory lapses. Since Mr Fisk relies heavily on quoting Spurgeon, we will see if two can play at that game. In his "Treasury of David" Spurgeon writes of irresistible grace and implies the doctrine of limited atonement when commenting upon the twenty-second psalm: "Sovereign grace shall bring out from among men the blood-bought ones. Nothing shall thwart the divine purpose. The chosen shall come to life, to faith, to pardon, to heaven." But these concepts are totally alien to Mr Fisk. The grace he believes in is any thing but sovereign and all men, if only they would realise it are 'blood-bought'. And certainly, as we have noted, man does thwart God. What then of the 'celebrated' preacher?

Part one then is an attack upon the doctrines of sovereign grace. In its place is erected the god of human will. This is the basis of all attacks. Once the rot has set in quickly, one's whole theology quickly begins to stink and corrupt. Most of the authors quoted exhibit various stages in this decay. At present Mr Fisk seeks to emphasise the two 'sides' - man and God. Yet it is inevitable that man's ascent will not halt here. In this book man seems more or less to be on parity with God, or at least, he is made the major, vital factor, playing the vital role in his salvation. For example, the second chapter seems to teach a salvation not of works, but of work (faith) - "The act of accepting salvation is surely man's act, and that act is faith." But he goes further. Quoting from Scofield on page 33 he writes: "there are three things, grace, faith, salvation, and these are all the gift of God. But here is the significant fact ... you already have the gift of faith. Now you are saying: 'If I have faith, if already God has given me faith, why am I not saved?' Because you have not used it rightly."

Thus, everyone has faith! One is forced to consider what could be meant by the term 'faith'. It could scarcely be union or 'engrafting' with Christ; and it is as equally incredible to equate it with belief. In their efforts to broaden the narrow way and make the broad way impassable it is unlikely that they would pass anyone who is united with Christ or who believes in him. And according to the preceding quote everyone contains this mysterious "something" called "faith" within them. Yet only on the antecedent page Mr. Fisk himself writes "It (faith) is not given to all, because all will not avail themselves of it." More paradoxes?

All manner of questions could be raised, and all manner of difficulties are stumbled upon in the foggy quagmire of Arminian theology. How, for example, can a dead sinner reach out for salvation? If God is almighty and sovereign, how can he be thwarted and fettered by man? Is it possible for the foreknowledge of God not to be determinative, and therefore predestinative? Sadly, I find no answers. For a book assaying to "unravel the vexed questions of election" and to guide us through the "tricky theological minefield", there is precariously little argument or explanation. The best seems to be found on page 36 - "Dear friends, do not make difficulties about things where there are no difficulties." Convinced?

Things don't get better. The other tactic employed is to try to clothe real

Calvinists in the sanbenito of 'extremism' and other derogatory adjectives. Fisk and his cohort of Arminian theologians prove to be quite dexterous in this sphere. The H- word is bandied around a bit, this charge being levelled particularly against 'modern hypercalvinists' (a very general term). Others in disagreement are logical and cold, or lacking fire for souls. I quote but one particularly venomous attack. Concerning Pink's "Sovereignty of God"- "The book you have read is totally unscriptural. It is akin to blasphemy. It presents God as a being of injustice and maligns his holy character. The book denies that our blessed Lord died for the ungodly. According to Pink's perversions He died for the elect only ... It is just this kind of teaching which makes atheists" (pg. 24).

Incidentally, Fisk later tries to utilise Pink to lend him credence as a moderate, 'middle of the road' Calvinist. Seriously! The above quote is conveniently forgotten when he devotes an Appendix explaining how Pink toned down his views, quoting him to prove that he believed in human responsibility. Fisk never seems to grasp that this is not the issue. An ostensible correlation between responsibility and ability is assumed, but the basis is never made clear. Readers may be interested that he cites the hacked "Banner of Truth" version of Pink's "Sovereignty" as evidence that Pink moderated his "extreme Calvinistic reasonings" around 1927. This section is misleading at best, and in my view, at worst dishonest. To leave the impression, accidentally or otherwise, that Pink and the author are remotely orbiting the same path is a terrible blight to inflict upon the dead. Impugning our champions is one thing; pilfering them is considerably worse! Any validity of such a comparison dissipates when this book is juxtaposed with the other writings of Pink. Pink wrote a similar, though radically different book entitled "The Doctrine of Election." In it he expounds the Biblical doctrine of election, antagonistic in every sphere to the errors of the book being reviewed. Neither does he mince his words. Theologians like Mr Fisk are referred to as 'merit-mongers' and as agreeing with the 'mother of harlots.' If this is Pink on moderate, mellow mode, I greatly anticipate the full-blown variety! And remember, this book was published in 1938-40, allowing at least a decade for Pink to mitigate those 'extremist' views.

The second division of the book tries to explain away the many verses which contradict the author. These attempts are woeful. In the majority, Greek grammar or comments of venerable old commentators are recited in order to show that the verses do not actually mean what they say. Unfortunately, having no knowledge of Greek, I am not in a position to judge the linguistic dissertations. However, consider one passage from which the obvious meaning is hacked. 2 Thessalonians 2:13 - "God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation" A clear, concise proof of an eternal election? Apparently not. 'Chosen' we are told does not usually mean 'elected' or 'predestinated'! Regrettably, we are never informed as to it's real meaning (a printing error, no doubt? !!!). Then we are told that 'from the beginning' doesn't mean from eternity at all; the word beginning refers to "the time when Paul

went there to preach, from the beginning of his preaching there they believed." Finally, the goal of the choosing "is not of the unregenerate becoming believers". Instead of to the "final salvation", that is, those Thessalonians who believed were chosen to glorification, upon Paul's going there. The reader may decide if this interpretation seems likely. Other passages are also waffled upon at length, without any concrete evidence or explanation.

Either I am labouring under a terrible misunderstanding of my native tongue or Mr Fisk is seriously contradicting Scripture. Romans 9:19-23 says "Hath not the potter power over the clay ... vessels of wrath fitted to destruction". We are told firstly that this is an incomplete metaphor and we are not to "overpress" it. Then very cleverly, the passage is turned on its head. We are told that, really, the clay fits itself to destruction. Just exactly where Paul states this is unfortunately omitted, but we are assured, nonetheless, that this is the real meaning. It is also stated categorically that man is not clay, since he has a 'free will' and that God does not make these 'dishonourable vessels', he merely finds them.

Other passages are dealt with in a similar vein, often simply by adding artificial explanations. Sometimes these even contradict. The 'none' that seeketh after God, is to be taken as "classes or tendencies of sin". Alternatively, if this explanation doesn't take our fancy, another one is provided on the next page. We must not read that 'none seeketh after God', but that none seeketh after God "wholly." Those who have read George Orwell's Animal Farm will be acquainted with this type of reasoning. In that book, the pigs circumvent the rules set for all the animals, by secretly adding 'optout' clauses. Fisk's equally fallacious explanations are about as equally convincing. This section is followed by several Appendices on different authors whom he wishes to highlight. We already have mentioned two of those (Spurgeon and Pink). It would seem that this last part of the book is an appeal to those with slight Calvinist tendencies. The above two, along with John Calvin, are quoted with sentiments that the author feels are akin to his.

The book's danger lies in irrelevant quotes from people like Pink which allow it to pose as moderate compared with those extremists who are 'more Calvinistic than Calvin himself', as the saying goes. Barrels of Arminian arsenic are diluted by droplets of watery Calvinism. Today the enemy masses under the covers of Evolution, Roman Catholicism, Arminianism and others. They all seek to apotheosize man and we should beware of them. But it also gathers beneath the banner of what is in fact a terrible pseudo-calvinism. When the last of the 7000 faithful in Israel seem to have fallen, it looms as temptation. Perhaps we are mistaken? Can't we lay greater emphasis upon man? Shouldn't we broaden our appeal? What about those 'all' verses? This is not hypothetical demagoguery. Every denomination, has without exception, throughout history grown cold, compromised and decayed. We must not, cannot, allow complacency to enter. With God's grace these errors must be resisted. Resisted firmly, unflinchingly and passionately.