

John Knox, & God's Will Concerning Sinners

It is a common sentiment in evangelical preaching, that God the Father wills that each and every sinner upon earth should believe in Christ as his or her own Saviour.

This sentiment is not confined to Arminian denominations. It has been adopted unquestioningly by many of Calvinistic conviction today in Scotland. As to the sincerity of the will of God concerning the sinners for whom Christ did not die, recourse is frequently had to attributing two wills to God. One will is explained as being universal in desire, while the second will desires only the salvation of the elect. With the recent republishing of Knox's Works[1], and, somewhat earlier the works of George Gillespie and Samuel Rutherford, it becomes possible to read what these fathers of the Church of Scotland believed and taught on the subject. There was a markedly different Gospel to the modern one in several important aspects.

The best place to observe John Knox's teaching on the matter is in his substantial work 'On Predestination'[1]. While living in Geneva about 1558, Knox was asked by persons back in England to answer a book circulating there titled 'Careless by Necessity'. This work, written by an Anabaptist, denied the doctrine of Predestination.[2] Knox complied with the English request, probably completing the work while in Dieppe awaiting official permission to re-enter England. This work is the longest of Knox's writings-occupying 443 pages in the David Laing reprint. No doubts exist concerning its authorship. Knox was independently named as its author when permission was granted for it to be printed in Geneva on Nov 13th 1559.

'On Predestination' is in the form of an 'answer', and is disputational in structure. Knox alternately quotes an assertion from his 'Adversarie', immediately following it with his 'Answer'.

Our interest is in Knox's teaching as to whom God wills to be saved. The following extracts demonstrate his convictions as he counters assertions from his Anabaptist opponent. Anabaptist assertion 1:

'God wills not the death of a sinner but rather that he convert and live' Knox replies:

'Let us briefly consider what sinners they are whose death God will(s) not, but rather that they convert and live. Saint John in his epistle saith, 'If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the verity is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to remit to us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' etc. And after, 'Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law, for sin is the transgression of the law.. And ye know that He is revealed to take away our sins, and in Him is no sin. As many as abide in Him (that is, in Christ Jesus) sin not. Whosoever sinneth hath not seen Him, neither hath known Him' etc 'He that committeth sin is of the devil, for the devil sinneth from the beginning' etc 'Whosoever is born of God committeth not sin, for His seed abideth in Him; neither can he sin, because he is born of God.'

Of which words it is evident that there be two sorts of sinners, the one be they who mourn lament and bewail their own wretchedness and misery, unfeignedly before God, confessing not only that their whole nature is sinful and corrupt, but also that daily they so offend the Majesty of their God, that most justly they deserve the torments of hell, if Christ's mediation (which by faith they embrace) should not deliver them from the wrath to come.[3]...The death of such sinners did God never will; neither yet can He will. For from all eternity they were His elect children, whom he gave to his dear son to be His inheritance[4] ...The death, I say, of those sinners God will not, but He will that they repent and live' '...But there is another sort of sinners far different from these...[5]

Writing 87 years later Samuel Rutherford would echo the same truths; 'Humbled, wearied and self-condemned sinners only, are to believe, and come to Christ. It is true, all sinners are obliged to believe, but to believe after the order of free grace; that is, that they be first self-lost and sick, and then saved by the physician.'[6] Anabaptist assertion 2:

'God wills all men to be saved' Knox Replies:

'The Apostle in these words: 'God willeth all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' speaketh not of every man, and of every particular person, but of all men in general, that is to say, of men of all estates, all conditions, all realms, and all ages.[7]

Samuel Rutherford described the matter thus; 'The love of 3 of John 16 is restricted to the church [8].. 'The loved world, the world saved (v17), the world of which Christ is the Saviour (John 4:42), the world that Christ giveth His life unto (John 6:33) and for whose life he giveth His life (v55), the world of which Abraham, but much more Christ, is heir (Rom 4:13) the reconciled world, occasioned by the Jews falling off Christ (Rom 11:15). All these are the Elect, Believing, and Redeemed World;[9]

George Gillespie, while participating in the Westminster debate on John 3:16, expounded the passage as, 'God so loved the elect that whosoever believes in him...[10] Anabaptist assertion 3:

“God will not the death of any creature” Knox replies:

“The prophet saith not ‘I will the death of no creature’; but saith ‘I will not the death of a sinner’; [11] p408 “That God delighteth not, neither willeth the death of the wicked. But of which wicked? Of him, no doubt, that truly should repent, in his death, did not, nor ever shall God delight. But he delighteth to be known a God that showeth mercy grace and favour to such as unfeignedly call for the same, how grievous soever their former offences have been. But such as continue obstinate in their impiety, have no portion of these promises. For them will God kill, them will he destroy, and them will he thrust, by the power of his word, into the fire which never shall be quenched.” [12] Anabaptist assertion 4:

“God will be entreated of all, He biddeth all men everywhere to repent, and offers faith to all men” Knox replies:

“True it is that God is merciful, gentle, liberal, Protector, Refuge, and Life to all. But to which all? To such as hate iniquity, love virtue, lament for their sins past, call upon his name in verity, and do unfeignedly seek for his help in the day of their trouble. Of these no doubt, he will be entreated, how wicked and unthankful so ever they have been before. But by the contrary, he will destroy all that speak lies. He hateth all that work iniquity:..And thus I say, you shall never be able to prove that God will be entreated of all, except you can confute the Holy Ghost, and make Him recant these and other innumerable places.” [13]

Samuel Rutherford put it, “He came to call his own sinners only, not all sinners.” [14]

What is being emphasised by Knox, Rutherford and Gillespie is that the sinners who are called to forgiveness by Christ’s Spirit are those sinners convinced that they are sinners. Not sinners who are self-righteous and deny the fact of their sinfulness. And this distinction is in complete agreement with Christ’s assertion that He came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Now it is here that this doctrine of Knox, Rutherford and Gillespie is attacked by some who prefer a more “generous” gospel. Such moderns accuse John Knox of hyper-calvinism. They assert that for Knox, the gospel message is “practically” preached to the elect only. But herein they muddy the water. Starting with the call from God’s perspective (the internal call), they immediately equate this with the preaching of the Gospel generally (the external and internal call). If their point was that the Gospel is effectually preached only to the elect, all calvinists of whatever persuasion confess this to be true. Instead, they hint that Churches and ministers of Knox’s persuasion consciously confine their preaching to the elect alone. The Missionary history of the Church of Scotland shows that this accusation is not based on fact. The multitude of souls that have sought and found salvation within the Church of Scotland also shows this accusation to be unfounded. And a cursory comparison of sermons preached in Knox’s day with those preached later in the 17th Century (by men such as William Guthrie, Richard Cameron and Donald Cargill [15]), demonstrate an abiding, deep concern, to awaken the unconverted of their congregations and to lead them to eternal life.

If the critics mean that the preaching is focused more on the saved than the unsaved, then the criticism has some foundation. The church’s duty is not solely to repeat its Gospel invitation to sinners, but it must also build up the saints in the whole counsel of God. [16] Here God’s power is also seen week by week. Here the church excels as she preaches the whole of God’s word and applies it to the hearts of hearers. And her gospel is vastly superior when she does preach to the unsaved. Unlike the inoffensive gospel commonly heard today, Knox’s Gospel is no hypothetical, theoretical possibility of salvation to some, but a summons, a real, divinely powerful, most certain offer of eternal life to every conscious sinner upon whose ears it falls! “Arise shine”, it pronounces, “for thy light has come, and the Glory of the Lord is Risen over thee”;

We need such men as Knox today, who will not flinch at declaring the whole counsel of God, whether palatable to 21st century congregations or not. Such Knox-like men will make a permanent difference upon earth. And lost sinners will find the church to be the gateway to heaven indeed. May God grant us continual supplies of men like Knox, Rutherford and Gillespie into the ministry of the EPC of Australia.

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2. The full title is, “An Answer to a great number of blasphemous cavillations written by an Anabaptist, and adversary to God’s eternal Predestination and confuted by John Knox”;

3. Knox J. “On Predestination” Knox Works Vol.5 SWRB Edmonton N.D. p.416.

4. *ibid.* p.417

5. *ibid.* p.418

6. Rutherford, S. “Trial and Triumph of Faith” (Originally 1658) Edin. 1845 p.152

7. Knox J. “On Predestination” Knox Works Vol. 5 SWRB Edmonton N.D. p.410

8. Rutherford S. Oct 23rd 1645 Session 523. Minutes of Westminster Assembly, Mitchell & Struthers, 1874 and 1991, p.158

9. Rutherford S. ‘Christ Dying and Drawing Sinners to Himself’; SWRB Edmonton (N.D.), pp.487,8
10. Gillespie, G. Oct 22nd 1645 Session 522. Minutes of Westminster Assembly, Mitchell & Struthers, 1874 and 1991, p.156
11. Knox J. ‘On Predestination’ Knox Works Vol. 5 SWRB Edmonton N.D. p.408
12. ibid. p.410
13. ibid. pp.403,4
14. Rutherford, S. ‘A Modest Survey of Antinomianism with a brief refutation’ (Originally 1648) p.145
15. Kerr J. ‘Sermons by Martyrs-Peden Shields Cameron Guthrie and others’ Edin 1860
16. It is interesting to notice this same emphasis in the sermons preached by John Calvin & Martin Luther

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