

# THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truth of the Church to a New Generation of Believers

04-71

Dear Reader

I remember it well, even though it happened over 40 years ago. I'm not usually good at remembering details, but this was one of those things that hit you right between the eyes and knocked you flat! It was burned into my memory banks with fervent heat! My father, my spiritual encyclopedia, had recently passed away. I was in a small assembly and didn't feel comfortable bringing my problems to anyone else.

So here I was a young man in my late 20's, walking down the halls of the Ford Motor Co. "styling" building on my way to a meeting. Suddenly there was a large man at my side, one of the skilled tradesmen. Without introduction (as I recall it), he asked, "How can you go to an assembly where doctrine is considered very important when millions are going to hell and you are contributing to them going there by your assembly life?" Those may not be his exact words, but it is the gist of his question. He then said he went to an assembly where the number one priority was preaching the gospel and that they never let doctrinal matters get in the way of the gospel. And he was gone. I later found out who he was, but I can't ever recall meeting him again. How he knew who I was or anything about the assembly where I expressed fellowship must forever on earth remain a mystery.

If the Lord allowed that encounter to shake me up, He surely succeeded! Was the gospel supremely important, overshadowing everything else. I knew of the so-called "Great Commission" to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mk.16:15). I knew of Paul's strong words in 1 Corinthians 9:16, "Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel." I knew the verse, "Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men" (2 Cor.5:11). I knew the verses about hell fire. Could my unexpected meeting with this brother in the Lord be a call for me to change everything? Was I in a wrong "church" position? Since I also knew something of the Bible's teaching on the Church, I didn't think I was in a wrong position, but now serious doubts had been raised. How could the urgency of the gospel and obedience in doctrine, including the truth and practice of the Assembly, be reconciled? I was not a happy person. Was I responsible for people going to hell?

At that time I was the lead engineer for Ford on human tolerance studies using human cadavers at Wayne State

University (Detroit). It struck me that these cadavers didn't feel the impacts of various instrumented mechanisms to their head, chest, knees, etc because they were physically dead. The verse struck me like a flash bulb going off in my face, "You He made alive who were dead in trespasses and sins .... When we were dead in trespasses [He] made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)" (Eph.2:1,5). I wondered how a spiritually dead person could ever feel the weight of his sins, anymore than those cadavers could feel what was happening to them. Other verses began to make an impact on me. Then I found a pamphlet entitled "*Election And ...*" which opened my eyes on the doctrine of Election from both a biblical and historical perspective. Although lots more study followed, going on for years, I was on my way to see that only God saves, and only those chosen or elected will be saved, and that all the elect will be saved.

So a Christian could and should be obedient to all the doctrine and practice of Scripture while still being faithful in preaching the gospel, but only God would or could give the increase. I also soon found this was a most controversial doctrine even among those of the assemblies which owe much of their teaching to giants in the truth such as J.N. Darby (JND), William Kelly (WK) and F.W. Grant (FWG), all of whom clearly taught *election*. Perhaps because of its controversial nature it simply wasn't taught (I had never heard of it) or if taught, done so in such a general way that people could go away still believing what they wanted to believe. FWG said, "Election is so plainly taught in the Word that it is surely only the opposition of the heart to it that can account for it not being universally received among Christians."

Regardless of its controversial nature we're going to take up *Election* in the next two *Assembly Messengers* and explain this doctrine the best way we can. Instead of getting upset we urge you to prayerfully look up the verses and ask the Lord to make them clear. We cannot cover all the details even in two *Assembly Messengers*. But there are available pamphlets. To bring together what I learned in my study as the result of the above encounter, I wrote a pamphlet entitled *The Gospel and a Path of Separation – A Study of Election* (Believers Bookshelf). Also a smaller pamphlet entitled *The Sovereignty of God in Salvation* by FWG may still be available. Note also *Morrish's Bible Dictionary* under *Election*.

We want to begin with a letter that JND wrote when he was 61 years old, well studied in the Scriptures. It is on the subject of *free will* which is at the center of the election controversy. If mankind has a free will, then why not leave it entirely up to mankind to either reject or accept the gospel? Then, the preacher should use every clever means to reach various audiences with the gospel – various kinds of music, entertainment, polished speaking, beautiful surroundings, etc. But we find nothing of this in Scripture! But if mankind's will is not free, if it has become warped and blinded by sin and Satan, then something outside of man must do a work. And this is what the Bible teaches.

Mr. Darby's article is not the easiest to read, even with slight editing. But it is profound. Read it over slowly and prayerfully. Think about it. He does not give many scriptures so we will do that at the end of his article. May the Lord bless this study. Mr. Darby, the floor is yours ....

### **Free Will (J.N. Darby)**

This fresh breaking out of the doctrine of free will helps on the doctrine of the natural man's pretension not to be entirely lost, for that is really what this doctrine of free will amounts to. All who have never been deeply convinced of sin, all with whom the conviction regarding sin is based only on gross and outward sins, believe more or less in free will. It is the dogma of all reasoners, of all philosophers. But this idea completely changes the whole idea of Christianity and entirely perverts it.

If Christ has come to save those who are lost, free will no longer has any place. Not that God hinders man from receiving Christ – far from it. But even when God employs all possible means, everything which is capable of influencing the heart of man, it only serves to demonstrate that man will have none of it. It only demonstrates that his heart is so corrupted and his will so decided not to submit to God (whatever may be the truth of the devil's encouraging him in sin), that *nothing* can induce him to receive the Lord and to abandon sin.

If, by the liberty of man, it is meant that no one *obliges* him to reject the Lord, this liberty exists fully. But if it is meant that, because of the dominion of sin to which he is a slave, and willingly a slave, he *cannot* escape from his state and choose good (even while acknowledging that it *is* good, and approving it), then he has no liberty whatever. He is not subject to the law, neither indeed can be; so that those who are in the flesh cannot please God. And here is where we touch more closely on the bottom of the question. Is it the old man that is changed, instructed and sanctified? Or do we receive, in order to be saved, a new nature?

The universal character of the unbelief of these times is this – not formally denying Christianity as in earlier times, or the open rejection of Christ, but receiving Him as a Person, it will be even said divine, inspired (but as a matter of degree), *who reestablishes [the natural] man in his position of a child of God.*

When people are taught of God, faith makes them feel that without Christ they are lost, and that it is a question of [needing] salvation. Only their fright with regard to pure grace, their desire to gain men, a mixture of love and of the spirit of man – in a word, their confidence in their own powers, makes them have a confused teaching and not recognize the total fall of man.

For myself, I see in the Word, and I recognize in myself, the total ruin of man. I see that the cross is the end of all the means that God had employed for gaining the heart of man and therefore proves that it was impossible. God has exhausted all His resources, and man has shown that he was wicked, without remedy, and the cross of Christ condemns man – sin in the flesh. But this condemnation having been manifested in Another's having undergone it, it is the absolute salvation of those who believe, for condemnation, the judgment of sin is behind us; life was the issue of it in the resurrection. We are dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Redemption, the very word, loses its force when one entertains these ideas of the old man [such as the idea of free will]. It becomes a *remedy*, a practical deliverance from a moral state, not a redeeming by the accomplished work of another person.

Christianity teaches the death of the old man and his just condemnation, then redemption accomplished by Christ, and a new life, eternal life, come down from heaven in His Person and is communicated to us when Christ enters us by the Word. Armenianism\* ... pretends that man can choose, and that thus the old man is made better by the thing it has accepted. The first step is made without grace, and it is the first step which costs truly in this case.

\* Armenianism is a term used to describe those who (among other things) don't believe in the total ruin of man, so man can choose by his "free will" to accept or reject Christ (Ed).

I believe we ought to hold to the Word; but, philosophically and morally speaking, free will is a false and absurd theory. Free will is a state of sin. Man ought not to have to choose, as being outside good. Why is he in this state? He ought not to have a will, any choice to make. He ought to obey and enjoy in peace. If he ought to choose good, then he has not got it yet. He is without

what is good in himself, anyway, since he has not made his decision. But, in fact, man is disposed to follow that which is evil. What cruelty to propose a duty to man who has already turned to evil! Moreover, philosophically speaking, he must be indifferent; otherwise he has already chosen as to his will – he must then be absolutely indifferent. But if he is absolutely indifferent, what is to decide his choice? A creature must have a motive; but he has none, since he is indifferent; if he is not, he has chosen.

Finally, it is not at all thus: man has a conscience; but he has a will and lusts, and they lead him. Man was free in Paradise [the Garden of Eden], but then he enjoyed what was good. *He used his free choice, and therefore he is a sinner.* To leave him to his free choice now that he is disposed to do evil, would be a cruelty. God has presented the choice to him, but it was to convince the conscience of the fact that, in no case did man want either good or God.

That people should believe that God loves the world — this is very well; but that they should not believe that man is in himself wicked, without remedy (and in spite of the remedy), is very bad. [Such an] one does not know oneself and does not know God. [Letter ends with personal remarks not on the subject.]

Collected Writings, Old Edition, Volume 10, pages 292-295, 1861. Very slightly edited for clarity.

### **The Problem from Scripture**

The following verses show the terrible state of total depravity that man is in. These things are true of every unsaved person. It is a terrible list.

“The fool has said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works. *There is none who does good.* The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there are any who understand, who seek God. They have all turned aside, they have together become corrupt. *There is none who does good, No, not one*” (Ps.14:1-3). Not one person understands or seeks God. This is repeated in the New Testament about 1000 years later. See Romans 3:10-12.

“We are all like an unclean thing. And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags” (Isa.64:6). We can’t do anything in our unsaved condition to please God or gain His favor.

“The heart is deceitful above all things and *desperately wicked*; who can know it?” (Jer.17:9). What a terrible divine assessment!

“But you are *not willing* to come to Me that you may have life” (Jn.5:40). This shows that unsaved man’s will is unwilling to come to Christ for salvation. That doesn’t speak well for having a free will, does it? Man’s will is so twisted that he will never seek God despite every evidence to the contrary. This is seen, for example, in the almost universal acceptance of evolution and the denial of special creation, despite the mathematical impossibility for the chance development of life or of anything as complicated as our brains, etc.

“Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin” (Jn.8:34). A slave is not free. Sin is a harsh master indeed!

The terrible downfall of mankind is described for us in Romans 1:18-32. Read it.

Since we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom.3:23), we again see that, having sinned, we are a slave to sin. Again, our will is now corrupt, not free to accept the gospel. Sin is lawlessness (1 Jn.3:4) and how lawless mankind is!

Romans 3:9-23 gives us a terrible portrait of all mankind. “As it is written, There is none righteous, *no not one*; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable, there is none who does good, no not one” (Rom.3:10-12). Verses 13-18 go on in further description of man’s terrible condition. Unless God intervened, you and I would be no different: we equally would reject God. Especially we who were saved at an early age look at things through a new nature, a new life, a will freed from the sin that had enslaved it – through the new creation. Things seem so easy: why won’t those unsaved believe. How, we wonder, can they be so thick headed, so blind? How can they so easily accept non-Christian religions that offer no salvation from sin and often enslave them? God answers these questions in these verses.

“Because the carnal [fleshly] mind is enmity against God, for it is not subject to the law of God, *nor indeed can be.* So then, those who are in the flesh *cannot* please God. But you [Christians] are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you” (Rom.8:7-9). The mind or will of the flesh – of our old, sinful nature – is completely against God. It simply is impossible for the nature we received as being a child of Adam to ever please God or to understand or to want God. In spite of every pleading, it is content, yes, *desires*

to go on doing what it likes and does not care what God thinks or offers. A truly terrible condition!

“The *natural man* does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him: nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor.2:14). What a devastating verse! We were all born “natural people.” God says then that we, while a natural man, *cannot* know spiritual things: they are foolishness to us. Some unsaved college professors of Biblical History can believe and teach biblical facts, but there is no personal reception of those things. What a terrible state each of us was once in! What a change for us who are saved!

“Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them” (2 Cor.4:3-4). What a terrible one-two-three punch! Not only do the unsaved have an absolutely corrupt nature and are spiritually dead in trespasses and sins, but now we learn that Satan is blinding the minds of the unsaved to the gospel. Any one of the three would be enough to doom mankind. What then is the remedy? We will see later.

And you He made alive who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of the flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, *and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others*. But God, who is rich in mercy because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were *dead in trespasses*, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the [heavenlies, JND] in Christ Jesus .... For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that [faith] not of yourselves: it is *the gift of God*, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are *His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus* for good works ...” (Eph.2:1-10). What a condition – children of wrath, dead in sins – and what a remedy! God has stepped in by grace, by undeserved favor, love in action, and done the divine work that saved us, even creating our faith!

### **The Gospel Flows Freely**

Three verses will be sufficient to show that the gospel itself, God’s good news, or its preaching is not to blame for man’s rejection. First we will look at John 3:16, the best known of all biblical verses. “For God so loved the

world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” Could anything be more plain? It is unconditional. Anyone can come, and all who come will be given everlasting life, the very life of Christ! But man, apart from the direct intervention of God, sadly will not come!

Then we have Romans 10:13, “Whoever calls on the name of the *Lord* shall be saved.” A little more detail is given in verses 9-10, but the promise is the same. But, again, mankind, left to himself, will not call on the name of the Lord. Yet the gospel is unconditional, the promise true and immediate. Christ remains the *available Substitute* for all, although He is only the *actual Substitute* of those who believe.

Finally the Bible ends with a gospel appeal. “The Spirit and the bride say Come. And let him who hears say Come. And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely” (Rev.22:17). It is not God’s fault or the gospel’s fault that man is so depraved that he will not come. The provision and the offer stand available to all.

God appoints some, called evangelists, to proclaim the gospel as their day by day service to the Lord. We all are told we can “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim.4:5). But in reading the entire New Testament we soon find this is only one aspect of our overall responsibility to God and man. In fact, evangelism is the responsibility of the *individual*, although an assembly can do what is needed to advance the work of the gospel by Sunday Schools, other children’s work, making time for gospel meetings, and financial and other support for those who are full-time evangelists, whether on the home front or as missionaries to foreign lands. We all can give out gospel tracts. But we realize that as the gospel is proclaimed, only “as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48).

In the next issue, the Lord willing, we will look at the doctrine of Election as taught in Scripture. We trust you will study the verses carefully and let the Word, not pre-conception or human reasoning, be your guide.

Our website [www.assemblymessenger.com](http://www.assemblymessenger.com) has all issues past and present available for reading and printing, thanks to my daughter. All issues are also on the website [www.inthebeloved.org](http://www.inthebeloved.org) for which we thank Randy Stephenson.

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