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**Are They Few That Be Saved?**

## by B. B. Warfield

The paucitas salvandorum has long ranked among a wide circle of theologians as an established dogma. To cite only a couple of examples from the great Lutheran systematists of the seventeenth century, John Gerhard (1621) and John Andrew Quenstedt (1685), uncle and nephew, both teach it without misgiving. Speaking of what he calls "the object of eternal life," "Gerhard remarks, that so far as sinners of the human race are concerned, they are first of all "few." "No doubt," he adds in the wish to do justice to the whole subject, "if the elect are considered in themselves and absolutely, their number is sufficiently large (Rev. 7:9: 'After these things I saw and behold a great multitude which no man could number out of every nation, and of all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the lamb, in white robes and palms in their hands'). But if they are considered comparatively, that is in comparison with the company of the lost, they are and are said to be few. Without any contradiction, therefore, the Scriptures assert that 'many shall come from the east and the west, and shall sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 18:11), and that 'there are few that be saved' (Lk. 13:23), that 'the gate is narrow and the way straitened that leadeth unto life, and few are they that find it' (Mat. 7:14; Lk. 13:24), that 'many are called but few chosen' (Mat. 20:16; 22:14)." Similarly, Quenstedt, in enumerating the "attributes" of the elect and of the reprobate—synonyms of the saved and the lost—gives the primary place in the two instances respectively to "fewness" and "multitudinousness." "The attributes of the elect," says he, "are (1). Fewness, as is taught in Mat. 20:16; 22:14 and elsewhere. 'Many are called but few chosen.' Here ὀλίγοι 'few' are opposed to τοῖς πολλοῖς, 'many,' or πᾶσιν, 'all,' as is shown by the lucid contrast made by Christ. But Christ contrasts, not election and vocation, but the number of the elect and of the called. If it be asked why the lesser part of men are elected and the larger part reprobated, the answer is that, according to the counsel of God, believers who are few are the elect, and unbelievers who are many are the reprobate. Because there are few that believe, there are also few who are elected." And again: "The attributes of the reprobate are (1) multitudinousness. For, because many are unbelieving, therefore

also many are reprobated. It is therefore said, 'Few are chosen' (Mat. 20:16), in comparison, that is, with the far greater multitude of the reprobate. The Saviour intimates the same thing in Mat. 7:13f, saying: 'Enter in by the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth unto destruction; and many are they that enter in thereby. For narrow is the gate and straitened the way that leadeth unto life, and few are they that find it.' Observe, the gates are wide and narrow, and the two ways are broad and strait. The broad way leads to death, the strait to life; the former is trodden by many, the latter is found by few."

The firmness with which this dogma is held could scarcely receive a more striking illustration than is afforded by the necessity under which Abraham Kuyper seems to feel that he rests, of bringing into harmony with it the great fact on which he has repeatedly and very fruitfully insisted, that it is "mankind as an organic whole which is saved" and the lost are accordingly only individuals who have been cut off from the stem of humanity. "Ask," he finely says, on one occasion,<sup>6</sup> "whether God has deserted since the fall this, His splendid creation, this human race with all its treasure of His image,—in a word, this His world, in order that, casting it aside, He may create an entirely new somewhat out of and for the elect. And the answer of the Scriptures is a decided negative.... If we liken mankind, thus, as it has grown up out of Adam, to a tree, then the elect are not leaves which have been plucked off from the tree, that there may be braided from them a wreath for God's glory, while the tree itself is to be felled, rooted up and cast into the fire; but precisely the contrary, the lost are the branches, twigs and leaves which have fallen away from the stem of mankind, while the elect alone remain attached to it. Not the stem itself goes to destruction, leaving only a few golden leaflets strewn on the fields of eternal light, but, on the contrary, the stem, the tree, the race abides, and what is lost is broken from the stem and loses its organic connection." Nevertheless he conceives himself bound to explain that the tree of humanity which abides may be, and in point of fact is, less in actual mass than the branches which are broken off for the burning. It is of the very nature of an organic as distinguished from a mechanical object, he argues, that it can suffer changes—even such as contract and curtail it—without losing its identity. "The human race," he explains, "is thus to be compared to a tree which has been pruned and now again

shoots up in a smaller size. The ruin of the genus humanum is not restored in its entirety; it becomes in its reconstitution an organism of smaller proportions. The Church, thus, conceived as the reconstitution of the human race, forms an organism of smaller compass, but the organism itself undergoes no change from this. Taken thus relatively, in comparison with the compass which the organism had earlier, the Church is a little flock. Taken absolutely, on the other hand, it is a great host which no man can number. The idea of some Christians that the whole of Europe is sometime to be Christianized, and after a while the entirety of the human race is to bow the knee to Jesus, cannot be maintained. The Holy Scriptures contradict this erroneous idea: Mat. 20:16, 'For many are called, but few chosen,' Mat. 7:14; Lk. 13:23."

The dicta probantia, relied upon for the establishment of this dogma of the fewness of the saved, are, as will have been observed from the instances cited, ordinarily these four: Mat. 7:14f; Luke 13:23f; Mat. 20:16; 22:14. As Mat. 20:13, a mere repetition in any event of Mat. 22:14, is spurious, the proof texts reduce to the three following, which we reproduce from the American Revised Version. "And one said unto him, Lord, are they few that are saved? And He said unto them, Strive to enter in by the narrow door: for many, I say unto you, shall seek to enter in, and shall not be able." (Luke 13:23f.) "Enter ye in by the narrow gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many are they that enter in thereby. For narrow is the gate and straitened the way that leadeth into life, and few are they that find it." (Mat. 7:13f.) "For many are called, but few chosen." (Mat. 22:14.)

A scrutiny of these passages will make it sufficiently apparent that they do not form an adequate basis for the tremendous conclusion which has been founded on them. In all of them alike our Lord's purpose is rather ethical impression than prophetic disclosure. Spoken out of the immediate circumstances of the time to the immediate needs of those about Him, His words supply valid motives to action to all who find themselves with similar needs in like circumstances; but they cannot be read as assurances that the circumstances intimated or implied are necessarily constant and must remain forever unchanged. What He says is directed to inciting His hearers to strenuous effort to make their calling

and election sure, rather than to revealing to them the final issue of His saving work in the world. When we read His words in the latter sense, we, therefore, do a certain violence to them; in deflecting them from their purpose we distort also their meaning and confuse their implications. We can always learn from these passages that salvation is difficult and that it is our duty to address ourselves to obtaining it with diligence and earnest effort. We can never learn from them how many are saved.

With respect to Luke 13:23, 24, this is obvious on the face of it. The mere fact that Luke has introduced this question and its answer immediately after his record of the two parables of the mustard seed and the leaven in the meal (13:18–21) is evidence enough that he at least saw no intimation in our Lord's declaration that the number of the saved would be few. Theodor Zahn even goes the length of supposing that Luke was led to introduce this question and answer at this point, precisely by his record of these parables. The recognition in them that the Kingdom of God was in its beginnings small and insignificant suggested to him to record the question which these small and insignificant beginnings raised in the mind of one of Jesus' followers and Jesus' response to it. However that may be, it surely would in any event have been impossible for Luke thus to bring simply into immediate conjunction words of our Lord which announce the complete conquest of the world by His Kingdom and words of our Lord which declare that only a few shall be saved.

Meanwhile it is clear that the questioner in our passage spoke under the oppression of the pitiful weakness of the Kingdom as it presented itself to his observation. Certainly Jesus had attracted to His person only a "little flock," and to them He had distinctly promised the Kingdom (12:32). He had been intimating, moreover, ever more and more clearly of late, the exclusion from the Kingdom of the great mass of the people. And His face was now set towards Jerusalem (verse 22). We may fancy the questioner either as deeply troubled by the puzzling situation,<sup>12</sup> or as rather pluming himself on belonging to so exclusive a circle. But whether speaking out of a heavy heart or out of a light head,<sup>14</sup> the question he put was a natural one in the circumstances.

Our Lord, however, gives no direct response to the question put to Him. He only makes it the occasion of addressing to those about Him (among

whom the questioner is, of course, included) an exhortation and a warning. They are to "strive to go in by the narrow door"—that is the exhortation. And the warning is: "Because many shall try to go in and shall not have the power." The important thing for them is not, to know whether few or many are saved, but, to address themselves strenuously to their own salvation. There is no revelation here accordingly that only a few are saved; there is a solemn declaration that many of those who seek to be saved fail. It is, in other words, not the number of the saved that is announced, but the difficulty of salvation. The point of the remark is that salvation is not to be assumed by any one as a matter of course, but is to be sought with earnest and persistent effort.<sup>16</sup> We must fight if we would win; it is in its due application true of all, everywhere and always, that they must enter into the Kingdom of God through many tribulations (Acts 14:22).

The meaning of Mat. 7:13–14, though somewhat more complicated, is scarcely less clear than that of Luke 13:23, 24. The chief formal difference between the two passages is that what is only implied in Luke—the wide door contrasting with the narrow, the two ways leading respectively to the two doors—is brought into open view in Matthew, and the whole scene is painted in detail for us. The characteristic of Matthew's account is, indeed, picturesque vividness, and we shall understand it best if we will visualize it as a picture; if we will summon up in our imagination the broad and roomy road running off on the one side, crowded with passengers, and the hemmed in and constricted pathway passing through its narrow gate on the other, with only a sparse traveller on it here and there; and hear our Lord say as He points the two out, This leads off to destruction, that to life: go in by the narrow gate! It is nevertheless just Luke's "Strive to go in by the narrow door" over again, presented more vividly and drawn out more fully. The lesson is the same; the exhortation is the same; and though the motive adduced is less explicit than in Luke, it, too, is the same. The specialty of Luke's account is the emphasis with which it throws up the difficulty of the task: the exhortation is to strenuous endeavor, "strive"; and the motive adduced is the failure of many to compass the task, "for many, I say to you, shall try to go in and shall not prevail." In Matthew's account, the difficulty of the task is no less the underlying motive of the exhortation, but it is not so openly

asserted. It is left to be implied by the contrast between the wideness and roominess of the road that leads off to destruction, and the narrowness of the gate and the constriction of the way that lead off to life; and the consequent populousness of the one road and the fewness of those by whom the other is discovered. A. B. Bruce says, quite erroneously: "The passage itself contains no clue to the right way except that it is the way of the few." The mark of the right way, on the contrary, is presented as that, in contrast with the broad, ample and smooth road which leads to destruction, it is narrow and constricted and hard to travel. That there are many who enter in by the one road and few who find the other is presented as merely the result of the difference in the roads themselves,—that the one is inviting and easy, the other repellent and difficult. The lesson that is taught, therefore, is not that there are few that are saved but that the way of life is hard. It is, therefore, that the fundamental exhortation was not "Go with the few!" but "Go in by the narrow gate!"

No doubt in the picture presented to our gaze the broad and roomy road is represented as crowded with journeyers and the straitened way as followed only by a few. A contrast is thus drawn between those who enter through the broad and roomy road as many, and those who find the narrow gate and straitened way as few. It is not unnatural to read this as intended to teach that the number of the saved in general is inconsiderable, at least in comparison with the number of the lost. Nevertheless it would be wrong thus to transmute this vivid transcript of a phase of life into a didactic assertion of the ultimate proportions of the saved and lost. We should be warned against such mechanical dealings with our Lord's similitudes by a remembrance of parallel instances. There is no more reason to suppose that this similitude teaches that the saved shall be fewer than the lost than there is to suppose that the parable of the Ten Virgins (Mat. 25:1ff) teaches that they shall be precisely equal in number: and there is far less reason to suppose that this similitude teaches that the saved shall be few comparatively to the lost than there is to suppose that the parable of the Tares in the Corn (Mat. 13:24ff) teaches that the lost shall be inconsiderable in number in comparison with the saved—for that, indeed, is an important part of the teaching of that parable. What we have in our present similitude is merely a vivid picture of life, true to the life that lay before the eyes of those our Saviour was



addressing; true, no doubt, too, to the life that lies still before our eyes after two thousand years have passed; and therefore carrying home to their consciences and to ours with poignancy and effect the fundamental teaching of the similitude—that the way of life is hard and it is our first duty to address ourselves with vigor to walking firmly in it. But why must we say that this similitude must be equally true to life always and everywhere? Can there be no community—has there never been a community, is there no community to-day—however small, in which, happily, the majority of the inhabitants have deserted the broad and ample road that leads to destruction and are pursuing the straitened way through the narrow gate that leads to life? And as the years and centuries and ages flow on, can it never be—is it not to be—that the proportions following "the two ways" shall be reversed? There is nothing in this vivid picture of the life of man as falling under the observation of our Lord's hearers—and our own—to forbid the hope—or expectation—of such a reversal. That could be only if it were didactically asserted that in the ultimate distribution of the awards of human life, few are to be found among the saved, many among the lost. That is so far from the case here, however, that the proportions of travellers on the two ways are introduced only incidentally and for the purpose of giving point to another lesson,—the difficulty of salvation and the consequent duty of effort in seeking it. If there be any intimation elsewhere in the Scriptures that the proportions of the travellers on the two roads may be altered as time goes on, there is no reason why we should insist, on the basis of this passage, that there must always be few following the narrow way and many the wide—with the result that the sum in the one case shall to the end remain small and in the other shall by the end become enormous. And when we have said that we have already said that the passage supplies in no case any real ground for such an assumption.

There is no more reason to suppose that our Lord intends to sum up the whole history of redemption in the words of Matt. 22:14. The parable of which these words form the concluding clause is no doubt historical in its teaching; it pictures the offering of the Kingdom of God to the Jews by the prophets and the apostles and their rejection of it; and then the turning to the Gentiles and the gathering of the mixed body of the external church. It is with His eye on the rejection of the invitation of the

Kingdom by the Jews and the sifting out of the unworthy among the Gentiles, symbolized by the single figure of verses 12 and 13, that our Lord sums up the results of this history in the words rendered in our English versions, "For many are called but few chosen." For a right estimate of the meaning of these words it is important to determine whether they form part of the parable itself, the closing words of the king, or (cf. Matt. 18:35) are an addition by our Lord in His own person, summing up the teaching of the parable. In the latter case the terms employed in the saying need not be and probably are not, but in the former case—which seems assuredly the true case<sup>26</sup>—they cannot be and certainly are not, technical theological terms, analogous to, though not identical in signification with, the terms "called," "elect," which meet us in the didactic portions of the New Testament; but must find their explanation in the foregoing narrative. As this narrative is told, there had been many bidden to the marriage feast, and comparatively few, perhaps, approved; and it must be presumed that it is this experience which the king sums up in his closing words—if they be his. If they be, on the other hand, our Lord's own words summing up the teaching of His parable, it is still most natural to suppose that He confines Himself in His summing up to the bit of history which He had recited and speaks from the standpoint of the moment rather than that of the distant Judgment Day. The bit of history which the parable portrays, however, relates only the contemptuous and ultimately violent rejection of the Kingdom of God by the Jews and the consequent turning to the Gentiles with the result of attracting to it a mixed multitude. This situation is very fairly summarized in the words: "Many are bidden, but few accepted." It would in any event be incredibly harsh to take the word "called" here with any other reference than that in which "call," "called" are repeatedly used in the earlier portion of the parable. Whether, then, we assign the words to the king or to Jesus Himself, speaking outside the limits of the parable, their reference seems confined to the historical experience related in the parable, and that is as much as to say to the days of the founding of the Church.

It is therefore that Calvin in his comment on the passage contents himself with saying: "I do not enter into a searching discussion here of the eternal election of God, because the words of Christ have no other meaning than

that an external profession of faith is not at all a sufficient proof that God will acknowledge as His own all who appear to have accepted His invitation." That, of course, is spoken on the supposition that the reference of the words is only to the immediately preceding verses, which describe the casting out of the man who had not on a wedding garment. If the reference be broadened, as it would seem that it should be, to the whole series of invitations described in the parable and their results,<sup>29</sup> the lesson must be correspondingly broadened to something like—if we may borrow Jülicher's words without attaching ourselves too closely to his meaning—"The enjoyment of the Kingdom of God is connected with quite other conditions than merely having been invited." Perhaps we may say that the meaning is simply that there are many who have been invited to the gospel feast who do not really belong there; and that our Lord's ethical intention—always a foremost thing in our Lord's teaching—is, like that of Mat. 7:13f, Luke 13:23f, to incite His hearers to see to it that they both respond to the invitation of the Gospel and live according to it. This is finely brought out by Melancthon in the intimation that the declaration contains for us a consolation and a warning: a consolation—by reminding us, when we see so many hypocrites in the church, that, after all, there is a true church within the church; and a warning, for ourselves to make our calling and election sure.

The weakness of the basis for a dogma of paucitas salvandorum supplied by these passages cannot be buttressed by the adduction of other passages of similar nature. Passages of similar nature are somewhat difficult to discover; and they naturally rest under similar disabilities. Perhaps the most notable of those which readily suggest themselves is 1 Peter 3:20. There we are told that "a few, that is eight souls," escaped in the ark through the water, and this is presented as a type of Christians passing through the water of baptism to safety. The express mention of the fewness of those saved in the ark is certainly noticeable, and suggests that Peter was writing out of a keen sense of the fewness of those whom he saw typified by this escape. This being granted, however, we are scarcely justified in going on and seeing here an assertion of the fewness of the saved as the ultimate fact of all Christian development. Why may we not rather see here the reflection in Peter's consciousness of his own experience of the first proclamation of Christianity? Unquestionably it

was in very small beginnings that the Kingdom of God began; or, perhaps, the right form of statement is that the Kingdom of God has begun—for is not this church of the twentieth century still the primitive church?"<sup>34</sup> To our Lord, to His apostles, to His followers up to to-day the Kingdom of God has been like the mustard seed, "which indeed is less than all seeds," or like a mere speck of leaven which is lost in the meal in which it is buried. (Mat. 13:31–35.) E. H. Plumtre is not without a measure of justification, therefore, when he writes: "The sad contrast between the many and the few runs through all our Lord's teaching. He came to 'save the world,' and yet those whom He chooses out of the world are but a 'little flock.' The picture is a dark one; and yet it represents but too faithfully the impression made—I do not say on Calvinist or even Christian, but on any ethical teacher—by the actual state of mankind around us." What saves the picture from being as dark as it is painted is that the contrast between the many and the few is not the only contrast which runs through our Lord's teaching and the teaching of His apostles. Side by side with it is the contrast between the present and the future. These small beginnings are to give way to great expansions. The grain of mustard seed when sowed in the field (which is the world) is not to remain less than all seeds: it is to become a tree in the branches of which the birds of heaven lodge. The speck of leaven is not to remain hidden in the mass of meal: it is to work through the meal until the whole of it is leavened. The presence of this class of representations side by side with those which speak of few being saved necessarily confines the reference of the latter to the initial stages of the kingdom, and opens out the widest prospect for the reach of the saving process as time flows on; so wide a prospect as quite to reverse the implications with respect to the ultimate proportions of the saved and the lost.

It does not fall within the scope of this discussion to adduce the positive evidence that the number of the saved shall in the end be not small but large, and not merely absolutely but comparatively large; that, to speak plainly, it shall embrace the immensely greater part of the human race. Its purpose has been fulfilled if it has shown that the foundation on which has been erected the contrary opinion, that the number of the saved shall be comparatively few, far the smaller part of the race, crumbles when subjected to scrutiny. For the rest it will suffice simply to remark in

passing that it is the constant teaching of Scripture that Christ must reign until He shall have put all His enemies under His feet—by which assuredly spiritual, not physical, conquest is intimated; that it is inherent in the very idea of the salvation of Christ, who came as Saviour of the world, in order to save the world, that nothing less than the world shall be saved by Him; and that redemption as a remedy for sin cannot be supposed to reach its final issue until the injury inflicted by sin on the creation of God is repaired, and mankind as such is brought to the destiny originally designed for it by its creator. We must judge, therefore, that those theologians have the right of it who not merely refuse to repeat the dogma that only a few are saved, but are ready to declare with Alvah Hovey, as he brings his little book on Biblical Eschatology to a close with a reference "to the vast preponderance of good over evil as the fruit of redemption," that "not only will order be restored throughout the universe, but the good will far outnumber the bad; the saved will be many times more than the lost."

These theologians include—to go no further afield—such honored names among prophets of our own as Charles Hodge, Robert L. Dabney and William G. T. Shedd. "We have reason to believe," writes Charles Hodge, "... that the number finally lost in comparison with the whole number of the saved will be very inconsiderable. Our blessed Lord, when surrounded by the innumerable company of the redeemed, will be hailed as the 'Salvator Hominum,' the Saviour of men, as the Lamb that bore the sins of the world." Robert L. Dabney, expressing regret that the fact has been "too little pressed" "that ultimately the vast majority of the whole mass of humanity, including all generations, will be actually redeemed by Christ," adds:<sup>38</sup> "There is to be a time, blessed be God, when literally all the then world will be saved by Christ, when the world will be finally, completely and wholly lifted by Christ out of the gulf, to sink no more. So that there is a sense, most legitimate, in which Christ is the prospective Saviour of the world." "Two errors, therefore," remarks W. G. T. Shedd, "are to be avoided: First, that all men are saved; secondly, that only a few men are saved.... Some ... have represented the number of the reprobated as greater than that of the elect, or equal to it. They found this upon the word of Christ, 'Many are called, but few are chosen.' But this describes the situation at the time when our Lord spake, and not the final result of

His redemptive work. But when Christ shall have 'seen of the travail of His soul' and been 'satisfied' with what he has seen; when the whole course of the Gospel shall be complete, and shall be surveyed from beginning to end, it will be found that God's elect, or church, is 'a great multitude which no man can number, out of all nations, and kindreds, and peoples, and tongues,' and that their voice is as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, 'Hallelujah, for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.' Rev. 7:9; 19:6."