

# CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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## GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IN ELECTION (PART II)

It is not uncommon for people, upon hearing of God's sovereign election, to complain "That's not fair! It is wrong for God to choose one and not another. To be fair, God has to give everyone an equal chance!" This view ignores the Bible's assessment of humanity's sinfulness (cf. Romans 3:10-11). The Biblical doctrine of election presupposes God predestinating some to eternal life and the rest to eternal damnation. This doctrine has been grossly misunderstood and distorted, but the Bible emphatically teaches it (Proverbs 16:4; John 12:39-40; 13:18; 17:12; I Peter 2:7-8; Jude 4) and especially here in Romans 9. Calvin wrote, "Indeed many, as if they wished to avert a reproach from God, accept election in such terms as to deny that anyone is condemned. But they do this very ignorantly and childishly, since election itself could not stand except as set over against reprobation. God is said to set apart those whom he adopts into salvation; it will be highly absurd to say that others acquire by chance or obtain by their own effort what election alone confers on a few."<sup>1</sup>

### I. THE PROOF TEXT OF GOD'S SOVEREIGN GRACE (9:13)

A. **The text in its context** (cf. Mal. 1:2). Paul's final citation of the section is from Malachi 1:2. At that point God is defending His love for Israel by reminding them of the definite distinction He has made through-out history between Israel and Edom, the nation that came from Esau. History, for the time of the pre-natal love of Jacob and the rejection of Esau, shows His love for the nation. The text includes within it not only the individual heads of the two peoples, Israel and Edom, but their descendants. The principle, as S. Lewis Johnson noted, remains. God's love is both individual and national, and it is a distinguishing love.<sup>2</sup>

B. **The text in its application.** The apostle uses the passage here to show that the electing purpose of God may be clearly seen in Israel's history. They should not have been surprised by their rejection, when they as a nation lapsed into unbelief, an unbelief that reached its climax in the crucifixion of their Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some have sought to avoid an individual election by God to salvation by suggesting that Paul has in mind only the election of nations in Romans 9-11. But, if it is unjust to elect a man to salvation on the grounds of free grace alone, then how much more unjust is it to elect an entire nation of individuals on that ground? It is a foolish subterfuge to seek cover from criticism for distinguishing grace by fleeing to the doctrine of a national election.

But what is meant by "Esau have I hated?" There is no personal animosity in the term "hated." What is meant is the decisive rejection of another claim upon God's mercy and grace. "In God's hate there is no malice, malignancy, vindictiveness, unholy rancour or bitterness. The kind of hate thus characterized is condemned in Scripture and it would be blasphemy to predicate the same of God. But there is a hate in us that is the expression of holy jealousy for God's honour and of love to him (cf. Psalms 26:5; 31:6; 139:21, 22; Jude 23; Rev. 2:6). This hate is the reflection in us of God's jealousy for his own honour. We must, therefore, recognize that there is in God a holy hate that cannot be defined in terms of not loving or loving less."<sup>3</sup>

The words *love* and *hate* convey God's sovereign act of election in the case of Jacob and His sovereign displeasure with Esau. And, as Robert Haldane pointed out many years ago, this truth is not greatly appreciated. "Nothing can more clearly manifest the strong opposition of the human mind to the doctrine of the Divine sovereignty, than the violence which human ingenuity has employed to wrest the expression, *Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated*. By many

this has been explained, 'Esau have I loved less.' But Esau was not the object of any degree of the Divine love, and the word *hate* never signifies *to love less*. The occurrence of the word in that expression, 'hate father and mother,' Luke xiv.26, has been alleged in vindication of this explanation; but the word in this last phrase is used figuratively, and in a manner that cannot be mistaken. Although hatred is not meant to be asserted, yet hatred is the thing that is literally expressed. By a strong figure of speech, *that* is called hatred which resembles it in its effects. We will not obey those whom we hate, if we can avoid it. Just so, if our parents command us to disobey Jesus Christ, we must not obey them; and this is called hatred, figuratively, from the resemblance of its effects. But in this passage, in which the expression, 'Esau have I hated,' occurs, everything is literal. The Apostle is reasoning from premises to a conclusion. Besides, the contrast of loving Jacob with hating Esau, shows that the last phrase is literal and proper hatred. If God's love to Jacob was real literal love, God's hatred to Esau must be real literal hatred. It might as well be said that the phrase, 'Jacob have I loved,' does not signify that God really loved Jacob, but that to love here signifies only to hate less, and that all that is meant by the expression, is that God hated Jacob less than he hated Esau. If every man's own mind is a sufficient security against concluding the meaning to be, 'Jacob have I hated less,' his judgment ought to be a security against the equally unwarrantable meaning, 'Esau have I loved less.'"<sup>4</sup>

## II DOUBLE PREDESTINATION

The Bible makes clear that God's glory is at the center of His actions in the world. Robert Reymond helpfully summarizes both the Biblical and confessional data on the subject.

"Every Christian will have either a God-centered or a man-centered theology. The Christian who gives the Bible its due will learn that, just as the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever, so also the chief end of God is to glorify and to enjoy *himself* forever. He will learn from Scripture that God loves himself with a holy love and with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, that he himself is at the center of his affections, and that the impulse that drives him and the thing he pursues in everything he does is his own glory! He will learn that God created all things *for his own glory* (Isa. 43:7, 21), more specifically, in order that he might show forth through the church his 'many splendored' wisdom to the principalities and powers in heavenly realms (Eph. 3:9-10), that he chose Israel for his renown and praise and honor (Jer. 13:11), that it was for his name's sake and to make his mighty power known that he delivered his ancient people again and again after they had rebelled against him (Ps. 106:7-8), and that it was for the sake of his name that he did not reject them (I Sam. 12:20-22), spared them again and again (Ezek. 20:9, 14, 22, 44), and had mercy upon them and did not pursue them with destruction to the uttermost (Isa. 48:8-11). He will learn too that Jesus came the first time to glorify God by doing his Father's will and work (John 17:4, 6), that every detail of the salvation which Jesus procured and which he himself enjoys God arranged in order to evoke from him the praise of his glorious grace (Eph 1:6, 12, 14), and that Jesus is coming again "to be glorified in his saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed" (2 Thess. 1:9-10).

Thus the believer should not hesitate to declare that that same concern—to *glorify himself*—is central to God's eternal plan. In the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith, 'God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass' (III/i), and

by the decree of God, *for the manifestation of His own glory*, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death. (III/iii, emphasis supplied).

Without controversy, this is surely one of the 'deeps' of the divine wisdom.' Concerning those of mankind predestinated unto everlasting life, the Confession states that

God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of His mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith, or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving Him thereunto; and *all to the praise of His glorious grace*. (III/v, emphasis supplied).

Concerning ‘the rest of mankind,’ the Confession teaches that

God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby He extendeth or withholdeth mercy as He pleaseth, *for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures*, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, *to the praise of His glorious justice*. (III/vii, emphasis supplied)

These two groups do not arrive at their divinely determined destinies arbitrarily with no interest on God’s part in what they would believe or how they would behave before they got there, for

as God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath He, by the eternal and most free purpose of His will, foreordained all the means thereunto (III/vi),

such as his beloved Son’s atoning work, his own effectual calling of the elect, the Spirit’s regenerating work by which repentance and faith are wrought in the human heart, and his own act of justification and his work of sanctification. And, while it is true that God’s determination to pass by the rest of mankind (this ‘passing by’ is designated ‘preterition’ from the Latin *praeteritio*) was grounded solely in the unsearchable counsel of his own will, his determination to ordain those whom he had determined to pass by to dishonor and wrath (condemnation) took into account the condition which alone deserves his wrath—their sin.<sup>5</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** “Many mysteries,” observed John Stott, “surround the doctrine of election, and theologians are unwise to systematize it in such a way that no puzzles, enigmas or loose ends are left. At the same time, in addition to the arguments developed in the exposition of Romans 8:28-30, we need to remember two truths. First, election is not just a Pauline or apostolic doctrine; it was also taught by Jesus himself, ‘I know those I have chosen,’ he said. Secondly, election is an indispensable foundation of Christian worship, in time and eternity. It is the essence of worship to say: ‘Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory,’ If we were responsible for our own salvation, either in whole or even in part, we would be justified in singing our own praises and blowing our own trumpet in heaven. But such a thing is inconceivable. God’s redeemed people will spend eternity worshipping him, humbling themselves before him in grateful adoration, ascribing their salvation to him and to the Lamb, and acknowledging that he alone is worthy to receive all praise, honour and glory. Why? Because our salvation is due entirely to his grace, will, initiative, wisdom and power.”<sup>6</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Institutes of the Christian Religion, BK III, ch. XXII ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles (Westminster, 1975) p. 947.

<sup>2</sup> S. Lewis Johnson, lectures on Romans, TEDS, 1984.

<sup>3</sup> John Murray, The Epistle to the Romans II, (Eerdmans, 1965) p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Haldane, An Exposition of Romans (rpt. MacDonald, 1971) p. 456.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Reymond, A New Systematic Theology of The Christian Faith (Nelson, 1996) p. 343-45.

<sup>6</sup> J. R. W. Stott, The Message of Romans (IVP, 1994) p. 268.