

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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### SOVEREIGN GRACE

People in our society, like so many before it, are by and large, totally indifferent to their standing before God. People blissfully assume that God is so benign as to be totally nonchalant about such things as our trifling little sins. In this context people will gladly embrace the distorted notion that God's grace covers all and is given to all. Paul would have strongly disagreed. The Apostle knew that God was indeed a God of grace, that His mercies are very great (1 Chr. 21:13); the Lord is gracious and compassionate (2 Chr. 30:9); the Most High is kind to the ungrateful and wicked (Luke 6:35); if favour is shown to the wicked he does not learn righteousness (Isa. 26:10). But the Apostle likewise knew that God's grace manifested itself in election and was not something that fallen humanity deserved or had an entitlement to simply because we think God is obligated to be merciful. Machen made this helpful observation. "We are prone to look at the matter in exactly the opposite way. The thing that *we* regard as surprising is that any members of the human race, any of those excellent creatures known as men, who are supposed to be doing the best they can and be guilty, at the most, of merely trifling and thoroughly forgivable faults, should ever fall under the divine displeasure. But the thing that the Bible regards as surprising is that any of those fallen creatures known as men, all of whom without exception deserve God's wrath and curse, should be received into eternal life. We regard it as surprising that any are lost: The Bible regards it as surprising that any are saved. Naturally it is the surprising or unexpected thing upon which the chief stress is laid. It is for that reason, or at least partly for that reason, that the Biblical doctrine of predestination is concerned chiefly with the predestination of the saved to their salvation rather than with the predestination of the unsaved to their eternal loss. The latter side of the matter is less extensively expounded simply because it is everywhere presupposed. It forms the dark background upon which the wonder of God's purpose for those whom He has chosen for salvation is thrown into glorious relief. Why is it that some men are saved? Is it because of anything that they have done? Is it because they are less guilty in the sight of God than others? The whole Bible is concerned with denying that. God chose Israel, according to the Bible, from among all the peoples of the earth. Why? Was it because Israel was more deserving of the divine favour, or because it possessed excellent qualities which God saw that He could use? A man who thinks so, a man who thinks that that is the meaning of the Old Testament, just shows thereby that he has never understood at all the heart of what the Old Testament teaches. Underlying everything else in the consciousness of the Old Testament people of God, as that consciousness was formed by the divine revelation given through lawgiver and prophets, was the profound sense of wonder that God has chosen such an insignificant people, a people not stronger or better than others, to be His peculiar people. Whatever else there may be in the Old Testament, that is the heart of it. But that is predestination. Israel was God's people, not because of anything that it had done or could do or might do, but simply because of God's sovereign choice."<sup>1</sup>

## I. PAUL'S CONTENTION.

Since the apostle has answered his rhetorical question, "Has God cast away His people?," he now turns to consider the logical conclusion of the discussion to this point. The nation, as a whole, stands in a state of unbelief, but in the general spiritual corruption, sovereign grace has created a genuine remnant. Paul's opening words in verse seven may be expanded into, "What, then, shall we say to the present situation?"

- A. **The Failure of the mass** (7b-c). Paul's answer is clear. Viewed from the human side, what Israel seeks, namely a righteousness before God (cf. 9:31-33), she has failed to attain. The present tense in the word, "seeking" (ESV), is a vivid picture of the ceaseless and noble (although misdirected) efforts of Israel after a right standing before God. Note the emphasis here on religious zeal—but it is a *blind* zeal (Romans 10:2). Paul could speak from first hand experience, declaring that he was once zealous for his Jewish beliefs (Gal. 1:14) and as to zeal, a persecutor of the church (Phil. 3:6).
- B. **The Success of the remnant** (7d). On the other hand, the election has attained that status before God. And it is clear that the apostle emphasizes the divine grace in this possession of righteousness. He calls those who possess it, "the election," that is, they have their righteousness by divine selection, further defined in verse five as "the election of grace." Thus, God has not cast away His people. There are several things to note here.
- (1) In the first place, it is sometimes said that God elects only to service, and not to salvation. Here, to the contrary, the election has as its goal the possession of the righteousness of God (cf. 2 Thess. 2:13-14).
  - (2) Second, the use of the term "Israel" quite clearly shows that the apostle has the mass of the people of Israel, the nation, in mind. In the case of "the election," he has in mind that smaller particular body of believers in the nation. In other words, the election is not simply national; it is also individual election. The NIV has *elect*—but the proper translation is election, as Murray explains, "*The election of grace and the election of verses 5 and 7 must refer to the particular election of individuals in distinction from the theocratic election referred to in his people (vs. 1) and 'his people which he foreknew' (vs. 2). This distinction we found earlier in the exposition of 9:10-13. But the reasons for the same conclusion in this context are to be noted. (1) There is sustained differentiation in the whole passage, in verse 4 between the mass of Israel and the seven thousand, in verse 5 between the mass and the remnant, in verse 7 between the hardened and the election. We are compelled to inquire as to the source, implications, and consequences of this distinction. (2) The election is said to be of grace (vs. 5) and the apostle in verse 6 is careful to define the true character of grace in contrast with works. When Paul emphasizes grace in this way it is the grace unto salvation that is in view (cf. 3:24; 4:16; 5:20, 21; Gal. 2:21; Eph. 2:5, 8; I Tim. 1:14; II Tim. 1:9). (3) The election (vs. 7) is said to have obtained it and, as noted above, the thing obtained cannot be anything less than the righteousness unto eternal life (cf. 5:18, 21). (4) The seven thousand (vs. 4) are said to have been kept for God himself and as not having bowed a knee to Baal. As characterizations these imply a relation to God similar to the obtaining of righteousness, favour, and life of verse 7. These reasons render it impossible to think of the election as anything other than the election unto salvation of which the apostle speaks elsewhere in his epistles (cf. 8:33; Eph. 1:4; Col. 3:12; I Thess. 1:4; II Tim. 2:1; Tit. 1:1). These considerations derived from this context are confirmatory of what we have found above regarding the election referred to in 9:11."*<sup>2</sup>

- C. **The Judgment of the mass** (7e). Viewed from the divine side, however, something else must be said. Paul writes, “The rest were hardened.” The “rest” are those remaining after the subtraction of the chosen remnant. They have been hardened as a penal judgment for unbelief (cf. 9:18). Hodge wrote, “*And the rest were hardened*, that is, were insensible to the truth and excellence of the gospel, and, therefore, disregarded its offers and its claims. This PEROSIS affected the understanding as well as the heart. It was both blindness and obduracy. The passive form here used, may express simply the idea that they became hard, or the reference may be to the judicial act of God, see ix. 18. They were hardened by God, i.e., abandoned by him to the hardness of their own hearts.”<sup>3</sup>

There is some question over the meaning of the word rendered, “were blinded” (KJV). The verb, derived from a word referring to a callous, or a stone, is used metaphorically in the New Testament of the heart becoming hardened or calloused (cf. v. 25 [the noun here]; 2 Cor. 3:14). In this context, however, it may have the force of “were blinded,” as the KJV renders it. The following citations, with their references to the eyes, gives some support to this. The word relates to both the mind and the will.

The truth that men may be hardened spiritually is a stumbling block to the natural man, who resists both the biblical view of man and the biblical view of the divine sovereignty. That attitude we must avoid and, if puzzled or perplexed, let us bow before Scripture and await God’s future clarification of the mystery.

Two mistakes have sometimes been made in handling the puzzling, *were hardened*. Without proper consideration of the context some have explained the words as *they hardened themselves*.

Others have been guilty of a second mistake. They have stressed the passive voice incorrectly, as if Paul was trying to avoid any suggestion that God performed the hardening. In fact, it is more likely that the passive is used simply to avoid the use of the divine name, a customary Jewish practice. A simple reading of the following verse will pointedly reveal the error. Divine retribution, endorsed by our Lord Himself, cannot be wrenched from Scripture (cf. Matt. 13:10-17; Mark 4:10-12; John 12:40). As S. Lewis Johnson rightly noted, “In the discussion of such things we often forget an important truth: No one deserves the grace and mercy of God. God would be perfectly just in condemning all. The fact that He has graciously rescued His people is no basis for the charge of unfairness; it is a thrilling magnification of His love and grace. There is no evidence anywhere in Scripture that God prevents a seeking soul from coming to a saving knowledge of Him. On the other hand, there is every indication that, when one does come to Him and is saved, it is traceable to the efficacious drawing of the Father (cf. John 6:44). We rest in these truths.”<sup>4</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Bishop J. C. Ryle, correctly noted that the Biblical doctrine of election begins with two important truths, “Right views of human nature are certain to lead us to the same conclusion. Once admit that we are all naturally dead in trespasses and sins, and have no power to turn to God,—once admit that all spiritual life in the heart of man must begin with God,—once admit that He who created the world by saying, ‘Let there be light,’ must shine into man’s heart, and create light within him,—once admit that God does not enlighten all professing Christians in this manner, but only some, and that He acts in this matter entirely as a Sovereign, giving no account of His matters,—once admit all this, and then see where you are. Whether you know it or not, you admit the whole doctrine of Election! Right views of God’s nature and character, as revealed in the Bible, appear to me to bring us to the same position. Do we believe that God knows all things from all eternity,—that He governs all things by His providence, and that not even a sparrow falleth to the ground without Him? Do we believe that He works all His works by a plan, like an architect of perfect knowledge, and that nothing concerning His saints, as His choicest and most excellent work, is left to chance, accident, and luck?—Well, if we believe all

this, we believe the whole doctrine which this paper is meant to support. This is the doctrine of Election.”<sup>5</sup>

Regarding this critically important doctrine of election, the Calvinistic theologians who produced The Canons of Dort inserted Article 14 in their section of election and how it is to be taught. “As the doctrine of divine election by the most wise counsel of God was declared by the prophets, by Christ Himself, and by the apostles, and is clearly revealed in the Scriptures both of the Old and the New Testament, so it is still to be published in due time and place in the Church of God (Acts 20:27), for which it was peculiarly designed, provided it be done with reverence, in the spirit of discretion and piety (Rom. 12:3), for the glory of God’s most Holy Name (Rom. 11:33-36), and for enlivening and comforting His people (Heb. 6:17-18), without vainly attempting to investigate the secret ways of the Most High (Deut. 29:29; Job 36:23-26; I Cor. 4:6).”

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> J. Gresham Machen, The Christian View of Man (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1965) p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> J. Murray, The Epistle To The Romans II (Eerdmans, 1975) p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> C. Hodge, The Epistle To The Romans (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1972) p. 357.

<sup>4</sup> S. Lewis Johnson, class lecture notes, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1984.

<sup>5</sup> J. C. Ryle, Old Paths (James Clark, 1972) p. 464.