



The doctrine of reprobation and its practical implications

The fairly widespread neglect or rejection of the biblical doctrine of Reprobation may be largely accounted for by one or both of the following reasons. Firstly, it is a doctrine that has always been plagued by misrepresentations. Sad to say some of the friends of truth have unwittingly been guilty of this, to say nothing of its enemies. This truth has been misrepresented to the point that led Wesley to denounce it as 'worthy only of Satan'. It is not, therefore, surprising that it suffers neglect or rejection. Secondly, this truth has suffered because of its apparent irrelevance to Christian living. It would appear to many that this is simply a theological nicety which has no bearing whatsoever upon Christian conduct.

By addressing ourselves to removing both the misrepresentation that the doctrine suffers and the false charge of irrelevancy we hope to go some way toward renewing interest in and acceptance of a truth that ought to produce a vital effect on Christian living. Our first, and major task will be an exposition of the doctrine along the lines of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Our second aim will be to make some practical applications of the truth that will help to show how it should affect Christian living.

Before we are ready to consider the biblical basis of the doctrine of Reprobation we must define the meaning of the term, *reprobation*. In some respects the choice of term is unfortunate as it bears a rather different meaning from the biblical connotation of 'reprobate'. The usage of the word translated in the A.V. reprobate (Romans 1:28, 2 Corinthians 13:5, 6, 7; 2 Timothy 3:8, Titus 1:16) castaway (1 Corinthians 9:27) and rejected (Hebrews 6:8), conveys the idea of testing, failure, and consequent rejection. An examination of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 3, section 7, the classic statement of this doctrine, makes it plain that the term is not being used in this way. Therefore, in defining this term in accordance with the Westminster Confession we find it embraces two distinct concepts,

1. 'To pass by' some of mankind in the bestowal of regenerating grace; and
2. 'To ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin.'

The first of these is termed preterition, the second, condemnation.

Undoubtedly, the clearest testimony to these truths is found in Romans 9 which deals explicitly with the two branches of the predestinating purposes of God. In examining this passage our first objective is to give a general survey of its teaching. From verse 6ff the Apostle is answering the problem of Israel's unbelief by returning to the position laid down earlier in his epistle, "*For he is not a Jew which is one outwardly...*" (Romans 2:28, 29). Though Israel was indeed a chosen race there was within that chosen race a further selection, a selection that determined the eternal destiny of each member. Ishmael was as much the seed of Abraham as Isaac but in the purposes of God Isaac was preferred before Ishmael and the promise made, "*in Isaac shall thy seed be called*" (v.7). In other words, to quote the verse that follows, "*it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring*" (v. 8, N.I.V.).

As a further proof of the way God distinguished between the children of Abraham the Apostle goes on to instance the offspring of Isaac. Both had the same parents yet Jacob, the younger of the two, was given preference over Esau. The Apostle makes the unconditional nature of this choice most explicit in verses 11 and 12. It is hard to conceive of language better fitted to impress us with the absolute sovereignty of God in making the promise "*the elder shall serve the younger.*" The fact

that the promise was made, "*the children being not yet born*", emphasises that the promise was specifically made as an illustration of the unconditional nature of Jacob's preferment.

At first sight Romans 9:13 seems to support the view of some that the election spoken of in this passage is national and not personal. In this verse Paul quotes from Malachi 1:2, 3 where the prophet has undoubtedly in view the nations of Israel and Edom. The respective destinies of these nations, however, is but a reflection of the difference God first made between their respective heads, Jacob and Esau.

The very fact that Paul raises the objection he does in v.14 is positive proof that thus far we have followed his argument correctly. This is exactly the kind of objection that people raise when confronted by the fact that God chooses some and passes by others simply according to his own sovereign will and purpose. 'It's unfair, it's unjust', they cry. Paul replies, "*Is God unjust?*" and answers "*Not at all!*" (v. 14, N.I.V.). Indeed the answer to such a charge lies in the fact that mercy is optional with God, "*I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.*" God is under no obligation or necessity to show mercy, Grace is not debt.¹ Just as v. 15 emphasises the sovereignty of God in his bestowal of mercy, so v. 16 emphasises the impotence of man to do anything to merit such mercy. In no sense whatever is mercy under the control of the one who needs it; he can neither demand mercy as a right, nor can he by the most diligent labour do anything to merit it.

So far the emphasis of Paul's argument has been the prerogative of God in exercising mercy; God is absolutely free to grant or withhold mercy according to his own will. Now, in verses 17 and 18, there is a change of emphasis as Paul shows that the same truth holds good in respect of the opposite of mercy. For this shift in emphasis the Apostle brings forward Pharaoh as his illustration. As Isaac and Jacob have been used as illustrations of God's sovereign bestowal of mercy, so Pharaoh is brought forward as an illustration of God's sovereign activity of hardening. At a later point we will deal in some detail with the question of what is meant by the expression 'he hardeneth', but now we simply stress that the Apostle has God's activity in view.

*"The determinative will come to effect in the act of having mercy. The same emphasis must be carried over to the hardening; 'whom he will he hardeneth.' The parallel must be maintained; determinative will comes to effect in the act of hardening."*²

Again we find confirmation that we are following the Apostle's argument correctly by the supposed objections raised in v.19. To the Apostle's conclusion "*Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy and he hardens whom he wants to harden*" (N.I.V.) comes the easily foreseen objection, 'Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will.' The objector is not disputing the fact that the divine decree is irresistible, he is arguing that, this being the case, God, not man, is responsible for the result. This presumptuous, "*irreverent equalising of God with man*"³ is rebuked by the Apostle's illustration of the potter and the clay, vs. 20 and 21.

In vs. 22-24 the Apostle continues to work out his illustration of God as the potter and sinful man as the clay, in terms of God's determination to deal with some as vessels of wrath fitted to destruction and others as vessels of mercy. The point is stressed in v. 24, referring back to v. 8, that the vessels of mercy embrace the elect of both Jew and Gentile who together in the purpose of God make up the true seed of Abraham.

Having made a general survey of the Apostle's teaching, we now return to deal with the specific areas that shed some light on the doctrine of Reprobation. There are three areas that are fundamental to a correct understanding of this truth. They are:

1. The pre-supposed condition of those subject to the decree of Reprobation;
2. The attitude of God to this class of people;
3. The meaning of hardening.

Firstly: the pre-supposed condition of the non-elect, that is, those subject of the decree of Reprobation. In dealing with the decrees of God the Apostle consistently pre-supposes man in a state of sin. Mercy always pre-supposes sin. Therefore, in v. 15 when the Apostle alludes to the sovereignty of God in the bestowal of mercy it is with reference to sinful man. The same conclusion holds good in v. 18 and W.G.T. Shedd justly remarks,

"God never elects or rejects a nonentity. It, also, in both instances, denotes a sinful individual; otherwise, he would not be an object of the merciful action in one case, and of the 'hardening' action in the other. God never forgives and never 'hardens' a holy being."⁴

Once more we are irresistibly drawn to the same conclusion as we follow the argument of the Apostle into v. 21.

"Both those who are elected and those who are rejected, that are made vessels of mercy or vessels of wrath, are alike by nature in the same condemnation in which God might in justice have left the whole, but out of which in his holy sovereignty he saves some, while he exercises his justice in pouring out his wrath."⁵

This right of God to reject, or more accurately 'to pass by' is also clearly a sovereign, rather than judicial, activity. Preterition is to be viewed as the exact counterpart of election; as God chooses to bestow his saving grace upon his elect, equally he chooses to withhold his saving grace from the non-elect.

Such a conclusion is inescapable when one considers the N.T. term that the A.V. translates 'elect', Romans 8:33, Colossians 3:12, 1 Peter 1:2, or 'chosen', Mark 13:20, John 6:70, and 15:19, Ephesians 1:4, etc. This term [eklegomai] *"always has, and must of logical necessity have, a reference to others to whom the chosen would, without 'the being chosen', still belong."⁶* This conclusion is spelled out by the Apostle in Romans 11:7 and in similar manner by our Lord in Luke 8:10 cf. Matthew 13:11, Mark 6:11, 12 and Luke 10:21.

The other concept of reprobation, namely condemnation, *"vessels of wrath fitted to destruction"* v. 22, is plainly of a judicial nature. The non-elect are not condemned because of preterition but simply because of sin.

"The sentence of the last day will not be founded on God's negative act of not saving, but upon the sinners positive act of sinning. Christ will not say to the impenitent, 'Depart because I did not save thee', but 'Depart because thou hast sinned, and hast no sorrow for it.'"⁷

The ordaining to condemnation of the non-elect, Romans 9:22, 1 Peter 2:7, 8 and Jude: 4, is not to be seen as the exercise of God's sovereignty, rather it is God acting in his capacity of a Righteous Judge determined to vindicate the claims of justice.

Secondly: the attitude of God to the non-elect. When considering Romans 9:13 in the light of the original context of this statement (Malachi 1:3) it is obvious that an exegesis that qualifies 'hate' to mean 'love less' is quite unsatisfactory. The hate of Malachi 1:3 *"would require, to say the least, the thought of disfavour, disapprobation, displeasure. There is also a vehement quality that may not be discounted."⁸* Furthermore, any exegesis that fails to take into consideration the Apostle's use of the aorist will also fail to do proper justice to the term 'hate'. With regard to both 'loved' and 'hated' the Apostle has in mind a definitive action; he refers to God's sovereign determination to set his love on Jacob and his hate on Esau. The Scriptures make it plain that this love that God has for the elect is immutable, Jeremiah 31:3, Malachi 3:6. This love involves an aspect of complacent regard. The 'I know' of Genesis 18:19, Exodus 2:25, Amos 3:2, 1 Corinthians 8:3, Galatians 4:9 and 2 Timothy 2:19 contains the thought of, 'a delighting in' that the non-elect never enjoy, Matthew 7:23. Exegetical justice to the parallel statement concerning the non-elect demands that we acknowledge them as hated by God, a hatred that includes the connotation of an 'abiding vehement displeasure.'

The distinctive feature of God's 'hate' is the abiding nature of his wrath resting upon those whom he hates, John 3:36. God is not only angry when they sin, as he is in the case of the elect (Exodus 4:14, Numbers 12:9, Psalms 38:1 and Isaiah 54:8), but this is his fixed disposition towards them, Psalm 7:11. While it is true that the effects of this anger are not always recognised or felt by the non-elect, the fact remains that the wrath of God abides on them and what is true in time will in eternity be both recognised and felt for ever. It would be quite wrong, however, to conclude, as some have done, that the non-elect are utterly destitute of God's favour, kindness or mercy. Just as God can consistently display his wrath upon the objects of his everlasting love, so he can, and

does, display abundant tokens of his love of benevolence on those who are the objects of his everlasting hate.

One final qualification that needs stating concerns the grounds of the divine hatred. While sovereignty alone accounts for the love of God towards Jacob, and indeed towards every one of his elect, the same does not hold good for God's hatred of Esau or any of the non-elect. By nature all mankind deserves the eternal hatred of God. God in his sovereign choice of a people from such material finds no cause in the objects of his choice for the love he grants them. His love is a sovereign, free and unconditional gift. While it is true that God sovereignly withholds his love from the non-elect it does not follow that he sovereignly hates them. He hates them because they are hateful and he has sovereignly determined to withhold the grace which alone could change this hatefulness.

Thirdly: the meaning of hardening. Before dealing directly with the significance of the term 'harden' there are two general remarks that should be made concerning the exegesis of v. 18. First of all, God's exercise of mercy and hardening is sometimes of a temporary nature, i.e. he may be merciful to those he will later harden (e.g. Saul, 2 Samuel 7:15) and harden those to whom he will later be merciful (e.g. Manasseh, 2 Chronicles 33). Secondly, God's sovereignty in this realm applies not only to whether he exercises mercy or hardening but also to the degree in which these are exercised. Both the testimony of Scripture and experience reveal a tremendous variety at this point.

In determining the significance of the term 'harden' in v. 18 we must use God's dealings with Pharaoh as our guiding principle. In the Book of Exodus from Chapter 4, v. 21 to Chapter 14, v. 17 the A.V. gives 19 instances of the term 'harden'. The three Hebrew terms that are so translated are helpfully defined by Girdlestone⁹ as follows

- a) (chaza) to brace up or strengthen, 'the rashness of Pharaoh with which he set himself to act in defiance against God and closed all the avenues of his heart to those signs and wonders that were wrought by the hand of Moses' (Exodus 4:21, 7:13, 7:22, 8:19, 9:12, 9:35, 10:20, 10:27, 11:10, 14:4, 14:8, 14:17, 12 times).
- b) (kated) to be heavy, dull or unimpressible 'denotes his insensibility and grossness of perception' (Exodus 7:14, 8:15, 32, 9:7, 34, 10:01, 6 times).
- c) (qashah) to be harsh, marks the 'restlessness, impatience, petulance and irritability by which his course was characterised whilst he was resisting the urgent appeals not of Moses only but also of his own people.' (Exodus 7:3, 1 time only).

The first and last of these Hebrew roots are invariably translated by *sklēruno* in the Septuagint which is the same Greek term found in Romans 9:18. Add to this the fact that the Hebrew lexicons treat these three Hebrew terms as virtually synonymous, though having slightly different shades of meaning, and it seems reasonable to conclude that the meaning of all three of these terms may be poured into the N.T. term.

Of the references to hardening, eleven refer to God's activity while only three refer to that of Pharaoh. A study of these references should guard us from adopting the popular interpretation that God is understood as merely permitting Pharaoh to harden his own heart. These references make it plain that God is the prime mover and the references to Pharaoh hardening his heart simply indicate the mode God used to accomplish this end. It is obvious that God had it in his power to soften Pharaoh's heart and could in this way have brought to pass his purpose in the deliverance of Israel. God deliberately chose not to use this method and Exodus 9:16 makes this very plain.

Pharaoh indeed is guilty of hardening his heart but in doing so he acts out the sovereign will and purpose of God (cf. Acts 2:23). God positively and infallibly determined the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, yet he accomplished this hardening in such a way that Pharaoh himself was responsible for it so that Scripture and Pharaoh's own conscience witnessed to the fact that "*Pharaoh hardened his heart*" (Exodus 8:15, 32, 9:34).

This positive aspect of hardening is the sovereign withdrawal of the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit. In the hardening of Pharaoh's heart it is clear that the climax of the process was the

complete removal of every restraint that is imposed by the fear of God. The most striking evidence of a person being given over to a reprobate mind is that in the midst of the most fearful of God's judgments *"there is no fear of God before their eyes"* (Romans 3:18 cf. Revelation 16:9-11).

All that remains to be said concerning the meaning of 'hardening' is that all the non-elect are subject to a degree of hardening. It is the sovereign will and purpose of God that determines the extent. Many of the non-elect may be the most amiable, decent and loveable of people, indeed it may seem hard to believe that some are not Christian. Nevertheless, it is the common grace of God alone that makes them what they are. Let us not be deceived by externals: all that glitters is not gold; all that appears black is not dross. The Scripture, *"by their fruits ye shall know them"* (Matthew 7:20), makes it clear that after conversion the fact of a person's election should be evident. Prior to conversion, however, we have no right to judge by externals whether a person is or is not elect.

John Calvin's dictum, *"Doctrine is not an affair of the tongue but of the life ... it is received only when it possesses the whole soul"* is a truth which must be applied to the doctrine we are considering. When confronted by those who question if it really matters whether or not we believe this doctrine we can say with confidence that it does. This truth does have a bearing on our Christian conduct and involvement in the work of the Kingdom. We can go some way towards making this plain by briefly dealing with four areas of practical implication.

The first area is of a negative character. There is nothing in a true understanding of the decree of non-election that should hinder our zeal for the proclamation of the gospel or our urgency in personal witness. This needs to be stated forcibly because of the inference frequently made that this truth is dangerous and inimical to the furtherance of the gospel. Sad to say there are many who equate such belief with Hyper-Calvinism and insist that to hold such a view inevitably leads to a loss of zeal, urgency and warmth in evangelism. Even sadder, there are those who profess to hold this view and whose lives lend some weight to this charge. It is wrong, however, to conclude that belief in this truth inevitably leads to such a result.

Two scriptural examples may suffice to show that there are those who hold this truth without such disastrous results. Our blessed Lord rejoiced in the decrees of God:

"I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight."

But we hear him, almost in the same breath, extend a tender gospel invitation, *"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"* (Matthew 11:25, 26 and 28). Dare any charge him with a lack of zeal, urgency and warmth? Consider the Apostle Paul. Has any other person had as clear an understanding of the eternal predestination of God as he? Yet who would deny his extraordinary zeal, urgency and warmth in the work of the gospel? Let it never be forgotten that the one who wrote Romans 9 does so with the deep compassion that shines forth in his confessions of Romans 9:1-3 and 10:1. May God help all who would embrace this doctrine to embrace it in the same spirit as their Lord and the Apostle Paul!

The second area is in terms of the impact of this doctrine in the formation of Christian character. Similar to its sister truth, election, this doctrine is calculated to promote reverence for God, profound humility, trust and confidence. What is more humbling to the pride of man than the knowledge that the only reason he is not in the ranks of the non-elect is because God decreed otherwise. That God could have chosen otherwise and dealt with us according to our deserving rather than his mercy, is both awe-inspiring and deeply humbling. To know that every one of the non-elect is absolutely under the control of God should greatly promote our trust and confidence in God. To view the world situation and to see the wickedness that abounds on every hand, and yet to know that it is all included in the decree is a comfort indeed. To know that the wrath of man shall praise God and the remainder of wrath he will restrain, to know that even the wicked, seemingly chance acts of men work together for my good is solid grounds for confidence indeed.

The third area calls the Christian to a watchfulness over his own soul. Probably the most sobering aspect of this doctrine is the grim reality that the elect can suffer a temporary hardening. The fact

that Hebrews 3:8 exhorts "*harden not your hearts*" simply declares the danger of hardening occurring, a danger the Christian is to guard against. We have already noted that in the case of the non-elect the degree of hardening is controlled by the measure of restraint that God employs. It is equally true, however, that God places similar restraint upon the elect, preserving them from 'hardening their hearts'. There are times when God in his sovereignty is pleased to leave the elect to their own will (see 2 Chronicles 32:31 and Psalms 81:12, 13). That the Christian may backslide, both the Scriptures and experience bear abundant and sad witness. The Scriptures and experience also teach a doctrine of apostasy and because of the extent to which a Christian may backslide it will sometimes be very difficult to distinguish which is which. This means that the Christian should be fearful of a backslidden state and use all the means God has appointed to avoid it or to be restored from it.

Finally, an implication concerning how this doctrine should influence the preacher. The call to a preaching office is a call to faithfulness; the results of this calling are absolutely determined by God. While the preacher must constantly acknowledge his responsibility and constantly endeavour to be a more able minister of the New Testament he must also humbly resign himself to the fact that it is God, not himself, who decides the consequences. To believe in reprobation means that the preacher acknowledges God's right to use his ministry to harden as well as soften. It means he sees himself for what he really is, simply a servant. It is God alone who has the right to grant or withhold the blessing for which he longs. It means a lifelong humbling under the mighty hand of God, confident that whether or not he exalts us in this life, we can look forward to the gracious commendation of our Lord,

"Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

(Matthew 25:21)

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¹ W. G. T. Shedd. *Sermons to the Natural Man*, p. 359.

² John Murray. *Commentary on Romans*, Vol. 2, p. 29.

³ W. G. T. Shedd. *Commentary on Romans*, p. 295.

⁴ W. G. T. Shedd. *op. cit.*, p. 291.

⁵ Robert Haldane. *Commentary on Romans*, p. 482.

⁶ Meyer on Ephesians 1:4, quoted by B. B. Warfield. *Biblical and Theological Studies*, p. 327.

⁷ W. G. T. Shedd. *Dogmatic Theology*, Vol. 1, p. 445.

⁸ John Murray. *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁹ R. B. Girdlestone. *Synonyms of the Old Testament*, p. 66, 67.