

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE REFORMED FAITH

Editor

The Editor was brought up to believe that Christ died for all men, and it would indeed solve many problems if all men were actually saved. However, as he began to study the Scriptures, the Editor found that this was not what they taught. Instead, he found that what is 'universal' among men is that all are guilty in the sight of God and that none has any claim on His mercy or grace. "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God," (Romans 3:23) and "... the wages of sin is death ..." (Romans 6:23). We are all worthy of eternal punishment and if, in the end, this is our lot we have no quarrel with the Judge whatsoever.

What does the Bible teach that God decided to do about the problem of man's wickedness? Surely it tells us that before the foundation of the world He planned that His Son should die as a sacrificial substitute for man's sin and, as a result, man would be accepted as righteous in His sight and fit for the kingdom of heaven. This was agreed between the three persons of the Trinity before the creation and hence Christ is spoken of as a "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8).

For Whom Did Christ Die?

Now the point is, for whom was it agreed that He should make an atonement? The answer is clearly for His people (Matthew 1:21); for His sheep (John 10:15); for His church (Ephesians 5:25); and for those whom the Father had given Him (John 17:2). He could have decided to save every individual who had ever lived; He could have decided to save none. In fact He chose to save "... a great multitude, which no man could number..." (Revelation 7:9) and He wrote their names in the Lamb's book of life (Revelation 21:27 cf Ephesians 1:4 and 2 Timothy 1:9). His purposes are clearly set out in Romans 8:29-30.

Now as concerning who are elect and who are not, this is known to God alone and in a sense is no concern of men. The

universal command of the gospel is "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved ..." (Acts 16:31) and "... God ... commandeth all men every where to repent" (Acts 17:30). Calvinists merely qualify their belief by saying that only those who are elect will in fact repent and believe; those who are non-elect will of their own volition reject Christ and every overture made to them.

The alternative explanation is that Christ died for all men who have ever lived and because of this their salvation is made possible but not guaranteed. Several points arise as a result of this view:

- (a) If He died to pay the penalty for all men's sins, then no man can be judged for his sins whether He accepts Christ or not, because the debt has already been paid.
- (b) If He died only to make salvation possible, no man ever would be saved. This is clear from the teaching of Scripture on the nature of man's complaint. Not only is he alienated from God and polluted in every faculty by sin, but he is "... dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1,5 cf Ezekiel 37:1-10). Now dead men cannot bring themselves to life; it is a physical impossibility. They must be born again but no one can effect his own birth. Man is absolutely helpless.
- (c) Even though Christ has died as a sacrifice for sin, man has still to 'decide for Christ' or 'accept Him as his Saviour' or 'open his heart to Him' or suchlike. In other words man has still to do something in order to be saved and hence, in the final analysis, he is saved by works and the gospel is a gospel of works.

Calvinists hold that Christ not only makes salvation possible but He actually saves from sin. Many illustrations could be given, such as a house on fire with a person trapped in an upstairs room. The Fire Brigade arrive and run a ladder up to the window. The fireman shouts to the person inside, "All you have to do is to step on to the ladder." This is all very well if the person is fit and able, or not frightened, or not asleep, or not overcome by the smoke. However, the fireman would be truly described as a saviour if he jumps into the room, snatches the person from inside and carries him down the ladder to safety.

The charge is then made that this implies that people are saved against their will. Nothing could be further from the truth. Scripture clearly defines the means which the Holy Spirit uses to bring men to a knowledge of salvation. First He regenerates the

soul, then He reveals Christ as the complete and perfect Saviour from sin (John 15:26; 16:14) and finally He grants the gifts of repentance and faith (2 Timothy 2:25, Ephesians 2:8-9). Their coming to Christ is thus purely voluntary: they are made 'willing in the day of His power' (Psalm 110:3).

Election

Scripture teaches that there is an outward and general call and also an inward and individual call: "For many are called, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14). All who come under the sound of the preaching of the gospel receive the former but only the elect receive the latter. God called Israel as a nation but only a 'remnant' unto salvation (Romans 9:7-8; 11:5-7).

The outward call can and has been resisted both by individuals and nations, but the possibility of the elect being lost is nowhere countenanced in Scripture. The very terminology is indicative of election to eternal life: "... God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation ..." (2 Thessalonians 2:13). In His high-priestly prayer our Lord says, "... those that thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost ..." (John 17:12) and Isaiah tells us that "He shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied..." (Isaiah 53:11).

The teaching of Scripture on election is beautifully summarised in chapter 3 of the Westminster Confession of Faith, entitled "Of God's Eternal Decree." The Canons of Dordt are no less expressive:

Election is the unchangeable purpose of God, whereby, before the foundation of the world, he hath out of mere grace, according to the sovereign good pleasure of his own will, chosen, from the whole human race, which had fallen through their own fault, from their primitive state of rectitude, into sin and destruction, a certain number of persons to redemption in Christ, whom he from eternity appointed the Mediator and Head of the elect, and the foundation of Salvation.

This elect number, though by nature neither better nor more deserving than others, but with them involved in one common misery, God hath decreed to give to Christ, to be saved by him, and effectually to call and draw them to his communion by His Word and Spirit, to bestow upon them true faith, justification and sanctification; and having powerfully preserved them in the fellowship of his Son, finally, to glorify them for the demonstration of his mercy, and for the praise of his glorious grace; as it is written: "According as he hath chosen us in him, before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy, and without blame before him in love; having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace,

wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved." Ephesians 1:4,5,6. And elsewhere: "Whom he did predestinate, them he also called, and whom he called, them he also justified, and whom he justified, them he also glorified." Romans 8:30. [*First Head of Doctrine: "Of Divine Predestination," Article 7.*]

The Offer of Salvation

Some texts appear to speak of a 'universal' offer of salvation to all men, such as Matthew 23:37, John 3:16, 1 Timothy 2:4 and 2 Peter 3:9. In order to understand these texts we need to consider the will of God in the matter and also how the will of man is affected.

Christ has not entrusted any man with the knowledge of who are elect and who are not, and so the great commission is: "Go ... and teach all nations ..." (Matthew 28:19) and "... preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). Scripture clearly shows, however, that when God says that He wills the salvation of all men, a distinction has to be drawn between His will in an absolute sense and His will in a diminutive sense as an expression of that which is pleasing to Him. In the first category come things which signify His eternal counsel and decree – "My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure" (Isaiah 46:10). In the second category are things which are pleasing to Him but, if not performed, are no reflection upon the perfection of His character. In Ezekiel 33:11 God says: "... I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live" and in Isaiah 65:12 He says: "... ye ... did evil before mine eyes, and did choose that wherein I delighted not." Thus, the kind of texts under consideration, ie those with a 'universal' invitation, reveal that the repentance and turning of sinners is very pleasing to God and that He has done everything in preparing the way for them to return to Him. However, they do not teach that all men will in fact respond, and we know from experience that many do not.

Notice also, that if such texts, particularly 1 Timothy 2:4 and 2 Peter 3:9, are interpreted within the compass of God's absolute will, then all men (every individual) would indeed be saved and none at all would ever be lost.

The Words 'All,' 'Every' and 'World' in Scripture

One reason for the use of these expressions was to correct the false notion that salvation was for the Jews alone. Such phrases as 'the world,' 'all men' and 'all nations,' were used by the New Testament writers to emphatically correct this mistake. These expressions were intended to show that Christ died for all men

without distinction, ie He died for Jews and Gentiles alike, but they were not intended to indicate that Christ died for all men *without exception*.

In many cases the words 'all' and 'every' cannot mean every individual man and woman, as the following illustrations show:

Matthew 9:35 – It is doubtful if our Lord visited every individual village in the whole of Palestine. It is also unreasonable to suppose that He healed every individually sick person.

Mark 1:5 – It is unreasonable to suppose that every individual person in Judea went out to John.

Colossians 1:28 – 'Every man' must clearly be restricted to those to whom Paul preached.

Hebrews 2:9 – 'Every man' in this verse is qualified in the following verses, 10–13, by 'many sons,' 'they who are sanctified,' 'my brethren' and 'the children which God hath given me.'

Psalms 116:11 – David said: "... All men are liars." If the word 'all' is taken strictly, he must have been a liar himself.

Similar reasoning applies to the word 'world':

Luke 2:1 – The 'world' spoken of here is clearly the Roman Empire.

John 12:19 – Every individual man and woman had not gone after Christ – the Pharisees certainly had not.

Romans 1:8 – It is unreasonable to suppose that every person in the world knew of the faith of the Roman Christians.

1 John 5:19 and Revelation 13:3 – There is a 'world' of unbelievers. If 'universal' reasoning is applied to these verses, there are no Christians in the world at all.

Quotations from Former Divines

It is the contention of the Editor that Reformed theology, or Calvinism, has been the view held by the vast majority of Christians down through the ages. He feels it most closely follows the teaching of Scripture and is incorporated in the majority of Protestant creeds and confessions. The following is a small selection of quotations from the Reformers and their descendents.

Augustine: *Concerning the Predestination of the Saints*

'Paul does not declare that the children of God were chosen, because He foreknew they would believe, but in order that they might believe. God did not choose us because we believed, but so

that we might believe; lest we should appear to have first chosen Him. Paul loudly declares that our very beginning to be holy is the fruit of election. They act most preposterously, therefore, who put election after faith. When Paul lays down, as the cause of election, that good pleasure of God which He had in Himself, he excludes all other causes whatsoever.'

William Tyndale: *Preface to Paul's Epistle to the Romans*

'The apostle teaches us [in chapters 9-11] of God's predestination, from whence all things spring; whether we shall believe, or not believe; be loosed from sin, or not be loosed; by which predestination, our justifying, and salvation are clear taken out of our own hands, and put into the hands of God only: which thing is most necessary of all. For we are so weak, and so uncertain, that if it stood in us, there would of truth be no man saved: the devil no doubt would deceive him. But now God is sure of His predestination; neither can any man stand or hinder Him.'

Thomas Cranmer: *Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum*

'But we, taught by the Holy Scripture, lay down this doctrine in this matter, that an earnest and correct contemplation of our predestination and election (respecting which it was appointed by the will of God before the foundations of the world were laid), that such an earnest and serious contemplation as we have mentioned of these things soothes the minds of pious men inspired with the Spirit of Christ, and beginning to experience a subjection of the flesh and members, and looking upwards to heavenly things with a certain most sweet and pleasant consolation; since it confirms our faith of eternal salvation being about to come to us through Christ, lights up the most earnest flames of love towards God, wonderfully excites to thanksgiving, leads us as near as possible to good works, and draws us away as far as possible from sins; since we are elected by God and appointed His sons.'

Nicholas Ridley

'The death and passion of Christ was and is the one only sufficient and available sacrifice for all the elect of God.'

John Bradley

'Faith and belief in Christ is the work and gift of God to none other than to those which be the children of God: that is, to those whom God the Father, before the beginning of the world, hath

predestinate in Christ unto eternal life.

'The world, John the Baptist speaks of, whose sins Christ takes away, and the world which Paul says has been reconciled, is to be discerned from that world for which Christ prayed not (John 17:9), for look, for whom He prayed not, for them He died not.'

George Whitefield: *Letter to John Wesley*

'Says the dear Mr Wesley, "How uncomfortable a thought is this, that thousands and millions of men, without any preceding offence or fault of theirs, were unchangeably doomed to everlasting burnings?"

'But who ever asserted, that thousands and millions of men, without any preceding offence or fault of theirs, were unchangeably doomed to everlasting burnings? Do not they who believe God's dooming men to everlasting burnings, also believe, that God looked upon them as fallen in Adam? And that the decree which ordained the punishment, first regarded the crime by which it was deserved? How then are they doomed without any preceding fault? Surely Mr Wesley will own God's justice, in imputing Adam's sin to his posterity; and also, that after Adam fell, and his posterity in him, God might justly have passed them *all* by, without sending His own Son to be a saviour for any one, Unless you heartily agree to both these points, you do not believe original sin aright. If you do own them, then you must acknowledge the doctrine of election and reprobation to be highly just and reasonable. For if God might justly impute Adam's sin to all, and afterwards have passed by all, then He might justly pass by *some*. Turn on the right hand, or on the left, you are reduced to an inexplicable dilemma. And, if you would be consistent, you must either give up the doctrine of imputation of Adam's sin or receive the amiable doctrine of election, with a holy and righteous reprobation as its consequent. For whether you can believe it or no, the word of God abides faithful: "The election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded."'

Robert Murray McCheyne: *Sermon on Acts 13:48b*

'Every thinking man must know and feel that none will ever come to Christ but those who were given Him by the Father from all eternity. The only power that can bring a child of Satan and make him a child of God, is God Himself. Ah! dear friends, the power is not in creatures. It is not in the power of man – it is not in the power given to ministers; God alone can do it... Ah! my

dear friends this is a humbling doctrine. There is no difference between us and the children of wrath; some of us were more wicked than they, yet God set His love on us. If there are any here that think they have been chosen because they were better than others, you are grossly mistaken.'

Charles Haddon Spurgeon

'We are often told that we limit the atonement of Christ, because we say that Christ has not made a satisfaction for all men, or all men would be saved. Now, our reply to this is, that, on the other hand, our opponents limit it: we do not. The Arminians say, Christ died for all men. Ask them what they mean by it. Did Christ die so as to secure the salvation of all men? They say, "No, certainly not." We ask them the next question: Did Christ die so as to secure the salvation of any man in particular? They answer, "No." They are obliged to admit this if they are consistent. They say, "No, Christ has died that any man may be saved if..." and then follow certain conditions of salvation. Now, who is it that limits the death of Christ? Why, you. You say that Christ did not die so as to infallibly secure the salvation of anybody. We beg your pardon, when you say we limit Christ's death; we say, "No, my dear sir, it is you that do it." We say that Christ so died that He infallibly secured the salvation of a multitude that no man can number, who through Christ's death not only may be saved, but are saved and cannot by any possibility run the hazard of being anything but saved. You are welcome to your atonement; you may keep it. We will never renounce ours for the sake of it. '