

**REPROBATION & GOD'S GOOD
PLEASURE**

by

PROF HANKO

**EXTRACTED FROM
COVENANT REFORMED NEWS,
COVENANT PROTESTANT REFORMED CHURCH**

Reprobation and God's Good Pleasure (1)

Question: "If God is always saddened by sin and His just wrath always expressed against it, can we still say that His eternal condemnation of reprobate sinners is part of His good pleasure?"

The question arises out of what I wrote in the last two issues of the *News* concerning Luke 19:41-44 and Matthew 23:37. I was particularly concerned with the question of Jesus' sorrow over the apostasy of Jerusalem. These passages have frequently been quoted in support of a gracious and well-meaning offer presented in the gospel, by which God expresses His desire to save all men out of His love for all men.

I pointed out that the argument used by defenders of the well-meant gospel offer is that the text teaches God's love for all men and His desire to save them, because Christ wept over the sin of the nation of Israel. The weeping of Jesus is, therefore, the disappointment the Lord experiences that the nation rejected and spurned His love and turned away in disgust from His gracious expressions of His desire to save them. The sorrow is evidence of the frustrations of His desire: He wanted to save them, but failed.

I showed that this is impossible and puts this text in conflict with other passages of Scripture—a conflict, by the way, which does not bother the defenders of a gracious offer; they brush such conflicts aside, appealing to apparent contradictions in Scripture.

I explained various elements of the text to demonstrate what the text does mean, and in the last article pointed out that Jesus' sadness at the impending destruction of Jerusalem was due to His displeasure with sin, and not disappointment at His frustrated desires. It was this latter that prompted the question quoted above. The point of the questioner is important: he wants to know how it is possible for God to damn the reprobate according to His own good pleasure and yet be saddened by their unbelief. This point is a key to understanding why the gospel is not an expression of God's desire to save all men to whom the gospel comes.

We can understand this point if we have a clear understanding of God's hatred of sin. The negative part of my answer is simply this—and no one would disagree: God is supremely holy in His own infinite being. His holiness is so great that sin is a terrible abomination in His sight. He hates sin and the sinner. His holiness demands that sin be punished. However, if, as the Arminian claims, God tolerates sin and for the most part overlooks it, one is left with a god far, far less than the Holy One of Israel.

No one would dare to say that God is pleased with sin. No one would argue that God rejoices in it because He has ordained that sin should enter the world; that is, it is His good pleasure that man become a sinner, and God delights that his purpose is accomplished. I even shudder to write the words, for they are such blasphemous denials of God's infinite holiness. Yet the question implies the possibility of that very thing—although I know as a fact that this is not the intent of the questioner.

But we must look at the matter from a positive point of view. This requires of us, first of all, that we recognize how serious the gospel is when it comes to all with the command to repent and believe in Christ. The *Canons of Dordt* express the matter as clearly as it is possible to express it: "As many as are called by the gospel are unfeignedly called. For God hath most earnestly and truly shown in His Word what is pleasing to Him, namely, that those who are called should come to Him" (III/IV:8).

This seriousness of the call to repent and believe in Christ is emphasized in Scripture in many graphic ways. In Romans 10:18-21, Paul writes, "But I say, Have they not heard? Yes verily, their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world. But I say, Did not Israel know? First Moses saith, I will provoke you to jealousy by them that are no people, and by a foolish nation I will anger you. But Esaias is very bold, and saith, I was found of them that sought me not; I was made manifest unto them that asked not after me. But to Israel he saith, All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people."

This passage is found in a section (Romans 9–11) that stresses in almost every verse the sovereignty of God in the unbelief of the reprobate. Yet the text also says that the command to repent of sin and believe in Christ is so sincere that it can be described as God stretching out His hands to Israel.

In Isaiah 5:1-7, Israel is compared to a vineyard that has brought forth nothing but sour grapes. Yet, of that vineyard, God says, "What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done to it" (5:4)? That is indeed a powerful figure and one that must not in any way be minimized. The seriousness of the call that comes through the preaching of the gospel must be defended and maintained!

God's command to all who hear the gospel, to repent of sin and believe in Christ, is also rooted in His own holiness. If God did not demand, upon penalty of hell, that man turn from his evil way and believe in Christ, God would have to be charged with taking sin lightly and tolerating it at the expense of His own holiness. God created man good and upright and able to live in all respects in obedience to the will of God. That man is no longer capable of doing this is not God's fault, but man's own perverse and dreadful rebellion. Yet as all the Reformed creeds insist, God continues His demand that man obey him—even though he lost the ability to do this. To say that God now, because of man's total depravity, has softened His demands is to put a terrible blemish on God's holiness. God maintains His own holiness even though man rebelled. The gospel does exactly that: it demands, on the grounds of God's holiness, that man forsake his sin and believe in Christ. Anything less would make God less than He is.

But the matter lies yet at a deeper level. The questioner points this out. Scripture teaches that God is sovereign not only in election but also in reprobation. Romans 9:9-24 cannot be gainsaid. It is there in Scripture as clearly expressed as anyone can express it. God is sovereign—not only in electing some to everlasting blessedness in Christ, but also rejecting others according to His own sovereign determination. *Prof. Hanko*

Reprobation and God's Good Pleasure (2)

Those who teach a gracious and well-meant gospel offer do not want sovereign reprobation. The curious defence of the defenders of a well-meant offer is not a pious defence of the gospel, nor are these defenders interested in true evangelism; their vendetta is against the doctrine of reprobation. They do not want a sovereign God who accomplishes all his good pleasure in the salvation of the elect and also in the damnation of the reprobate. They are willing to sell the latter in the interests of a god who loves all men and seeks their salvation.

But someone may say, How can God sovereignly accomplish His decree of reprobation and still earnestly and seriously insist that all men repent of sin and believe in Christ? Or, to put it bluntly, How can God's eternal purpose and counsel sovereignly be realized in the damnation of the wicked and yet it also be true that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Eze. 33:11)?

Such a formulation of the question clearly puts the whole matter on a different level. The question is no longer the rightness or wrongness of a gracious and well-meant gospel offer. The gracious gospel offer is out of the window and has no place in Reformed thought. The question is this: How can a sovereign God realize the counsel He has eternally determined, and yet leave man accountable for his sin? That is an entirely different question, and, as a matter of fact, one with which the church has struggled since the time of Augustine (354-430). It is a question Luther answers in his book, *The Bondage of the Will*. It is a question Calvin faces in his treatise on God's eternal predestination. It is a question that is addressed in the *Canons of Dordrecht*.

Let me quote from the *Canons*. In the Conclusion of the *Canons*, the fathers at Dordt answer some vicious charges that were made by the Arminians against the teaching of the *Canons* on the truth of sovereign predestination. One of the objections that was made by the Arminians was that the doctrine of sovereign predestination (especially reprobation) makes God the author of sin. While that charge is repudiated in the *Canons* proper, it is also repudiated in the Conclusion. We read there this statement: "[The Synod rejects the charge that

predestination teaches] that in the same manner in which the election is the fountain and the cause of faith and good works, reprobation is the cause of unbelief and impiety."

The meaning here is clear. Dordt said that election is "the fountain and the cause of faith and good works." That is strong language, and Dordt insists on it. But at the same time, Dordt also says that reprobation is not the cause of unbelief "in the same manner" as faith is the fountain and cause of faith. In other words, reprobation, though sovereign, cannot be said to be the cause of unbelief. The *Canons* proper say, "It is not the fault of the gospel, nor of Christ offered therein, nor of God, who calls men by the gospel and confers upon them various gifts, that those who are called by the ministry of the Word refuse to come and be converted. The fault lies in themselves ..." (III/IV:9).

In the history of Reformed theology, the orthodox have expressed the truth that God is sovereign and man remains accountable in this way: God sovereignly accomplishes reprobation *in the way of* man's unbelief. Dordt rejects the idea that reprobation is the cause of unbelief. Dordt also rejects the error of saying that reprobation is because of unbelief, an idea that makes unbelief the ground for God's reprobation. And so, the expression has been and is still used: God accomplishes sovereignly his eternal decree of reprobation *in the way of* unbelief. In this expression, God's sovereignty is maintained and man's accountability is preserved.

One may claim that this is hard to understand. I agree. At that point where God's will touches the will of man in such a way that God's will is accomplished and man remains accountable before God, we confront a great and wonderful work of God that is beyond our understanding.

But our inability to understand this work of God is, after all, not surprising. What works of God do we understand? Not one of them! We do not understand how a baby is conceived and formed in the womb of its mother and becomes a new person with a soul or spirit. We do not understand how a blade of grass grows in the field, for we do not understand the principle of life that makes this possible. We do not understand how God moves every drop of blood in our veins and

arteries by his sovereign and omnipresent power and Godhead. We are feeble and small. We know almost nothing of the greatness of God. We stand in awe of the simplest of His works. We bow in humble adoration before His majesty.

Thus one problem persists in our understanding of the sovereign work of the gospel. Its difficulty may surely not be reason to corrupt the truth. We know with absolute certainty that the God of sovereign election and reprobation does not desire and long for the salvation of all men. We bow before the Scriptures that teach clearly that God has one will in Jesus Christ according to which He accomplishes all His good pleasure. We know to our everlasting shame that we are responsible for every sin we commit and that we deserve everlasting hell. We know that we cannot now, and never will be able to, lay the charge of our sin at God's feet. And all the wicked in hell will have to confess that they are in hell because of their own refusal to repent of their sin. The righteous shall forever marvel at the greatness of God's grace and mercy revealed in Jesus Christ that has given such glory to us poor sinners.

The theodicy is the goal of all history: that God is vindicated in all He does and justified in all His works. His righteousness and holiness are vindicated in the everlasting punishment of the wicked; His gracious gift of salvation is magnified in Jesus Christ in whom alone we have our salvation. God is God. To him is all praise and glory forever and ever, world without end. *Prof. Hanko*

REPRINTED AND REDISTRIBUTED BY

Christian Literature Ministry

clm@cerc.org.sg

Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church

(圣约福音归正教会)



PLACE OF WORSHIP

11 Jalan Mesin #04-00

Standard Industrial Building

TIME OF WORSHIP

Every Sunday

9.30 – 11.00 am

2.00 – 3.00 pm

www.cerc.org.sg