

Does God *Really* Desire to Save the Reprobate? (1)

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Our subject in this article is God: God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The question we are asking concerning the true God is this: Does God desire to save the reprobate? Does God *really* desire to save the reprobate?¹

This is not, however, the way in which the issue is usually expressed. It is commonly stated along these lines: “God loves everybody and God desires to save everybody,” or “Sinner, God wants to save you,” or “God has a wonderful plan for your life.” This is declared promiscuously to everyone under the sound of the preacher’s voice.

How is the believer to analyse these statements? Obviously, he must think as a Christian in the light of the Word of God and the doctrines of the Word of God. He must bring to bear on these issues, of course, the truth of God’s glorious attributes and His eternal, unconditional decree of election and reprobation. These doctrines are stated in all the Reformed confessions along with such doctrines as the Trinity, the Person and natures of Jesus Christ, creation, and all the rest. Election, briefly stated, is God’s eternal, unconditional choice of some fallen sinners unto eternal life in Jesus Christ. Reprobation is God’s eternal rejection of others. God chose not to save them but to punish them in the way of their sins. This too is an unconditional choice of God before He formed the world.

This is Reformed teaching. This is the teaching of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the confessions which are derived from it: the *Savoy Declaration* of the Congregationalists (1658) and the *Baptist Confession* (1689). This is the teaching of the *Canons of Dort* (1618-1619) and other Reformed creeds.

This is also biblical teaching. In Matthew 11:25, Jesus Christ says, “I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.” Jesus had taught and wrought miracles in Galilee, so the people there had

¹The speech from which this series of articles was derived can be listened to at <http://www.cprc.co.uk/m3u/godreprobate.m3u>

heard the truth of the gospel (vv. 20-24). Some spiritually understood and received it; others did not. The reason why some spiritually understood and received it while others did not is that God “revealed” it to some and “hid” it from others (v. 25). God’s hiding these things from the wise and the prudent takes place in time, in accordance with His decree of reprobation. God’s revealing the truth of salvation unto babes also takes place in time, in the illumination of the saints, according to God’s decree of election.

Jesus continues, “Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight” (v. 26). It was pleasing and good to God that some people would have the gospel hidden from them, even though they heard it preached, and that other people would have it revealed to them not only outwardly but also inwardly. When Jesus says, “it seemed good in thy sight,” we must understand that it was good in the sight of the *eternal and unchangeable God*. It is good in His sight on the day on which the illuminating of some and the blinding or hardening of others took place. It is also good in God’s sight before the foundation of the world, because God is timeless. Before the world, God eternally is; there is no time in the eternal God.

So then, does God love everybody, including the reprobate, those whom He has chosen not to save? Does God desire to save everybody? Does God have a wonderful plan for everybody’s life?

God *does* love all His elect people, the spiritual Israel of God. “Jacob have I loved,” God declares (Rom. 9:13). God *does* desire to save the elect and God shows that He desires to save the elect by sending Jesus Christ to die for them and by giving them faith and repentance that they might fellowship with and glorify Him. Moreover, God *does* have a wonderful plan for the lives of all of His elect people, for “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). This wonderful plan which God has for the believer’s life includes things which he would not have chosen for himself. But in God’s infinite wisdom, in His grace and providence, all things do work together for the believer’s spiritual and eternal good.

If these questions, though, are applied to the reprobate, the answer to them is “No.” God does *not* love them. “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated” (Rom. 9:13). Esau, here, is an individual. But it is not as if God loved all the reprobate people in the world but hated just this one individual person. That is not the idea. All who are reprobated, God hates.

God does *not* desire to save them. As Jesus said in Matthew 11, “I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and the prudent ... Even so Father for so it seemed good in thy sight” (vv. 25-26). This is good in God’s eyes. This is God’s desire, His purpose and will in this world. The whole Scripture teaches (and this is taught too especially in the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. & A. 27-29), that those who are outside of Jesus Christ and are not chosen are cursed. They are cursed in their unbelief and rebellion both in this world and in the world to come. They perish forever and ever in hell. This is *not* a wonderful plan for them. In God’s purpose it brings glory to Him. It magnifies His justice. But for them it is not a wonderful plan. It is only mockery to proclaim to everybody promiscuously, including people who are professed unbelievers, that God has a wonderful plan for their lives. God did not have a wonderful plan for Esau (Rom. 9:10-13). He did not have a wonderful plan for Pharaoh (Rom. 9:17-18). He does *not* have a wonderful plan for the reprobate.

But we are not going to talk about God’s love as such or whom He loves. In this article we are answering the question: Does God desire to save everybody? or, more specifically, Does God *really* desire to save the reprobate?

The majority of people who take the name Christian believe that God desires to save everybody. Obviously, Arminians believe this for Arminians deny biblical election and reprobation. The Arminian teaches that salvation or non-salvation depends ultimately on the alleged free will of the sinner. This is the case with contemporary Arminians in the world today, and this was the case with the Arminians at the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619). At the Synod of Dordt, the Arminians clearly stated the position called the free offer—that God desires to save everybody. But the Synod of Dordt did not take that position.

The Pelagians and Semi-Pelagians in the early church taught that God desires to save everybody. The Roman Catholic Church also insists that God desires and wishes to save everybody. Arminians and Romanists believe the same thing on these points. However, many who claim to be Calvinists also believe that God desires to save everybody, and therefore at this point their teaching is the same as the Arminians and the Roman Catholics. They teach that God desires to save the reprobate, although that is not the way they will frame it. That lets the cat out of the bag, because it is like

saying that God desires to save those whom He has chosen not to save, or God desires to save those whom He does not desire to save because they are reprobate.

Those who do not hold this view that God desires to save the reprobate, commonly called the free offer or the well-meant offer, are told that they cannot truly preach the gospel. If this were true, this is a very serious, even damning, indictment. Then the epithet “hyper-Calvinist” is used. These professed Calvinists, who maintain that there is a desire or wish or will in the very being of God to save the reprobate, teach that this is sincere, for God earnestly wants to save them. They make it clear that this is not just an apparent desire. This is a real desire. In fact, this is an ardent desire. God patiently, longingly wants to save absolutely everybody. This is the teaching even of Professor John Murray. In many things he is a fine teacher, but he is sadly astray at this point. He states that God wants to save everybody, and then adds the adjectives: ardently, sincerely, passionately.² If God wants to do something, and God is the one who tells us, “Whatsoever thy hand findest to do, do it with all thy might” (Ecc. 9:10), then God must be ardent about it. There are no half-hearted measures with God.

I will give you an analogy. Let us picture a man who says, “I want to go to church on Sunday. I really want to go.” Then comes Sunday morning, and the alarm goes. He knocks it off and rolls over. He does not get up and pray and prepare his heart for public worship. He does not dress as he would for going to church. He does not hop in the car. He stays at home. Now, he *said* that he really wanted to go to church. But he did not do anything that indicated that he really wanted to go to church. Did he really want to go to church? At best, it was but a half-hearted desire or notion, for he did not go.

Or take another instance, a man says, “I really want to go to church on the Lord’s Day.” He does get up, he eats his breakfast, he gets dressed *but then he goes to watch a rugby match*. Did that man really want to go to church? You know what he really wanted to do? He really wanted to go to the rugby match and that is why he went there. Because it is not what a man *says* but it is what he *does* that indicates most his desires.

Now we are told that God really, sincerely, ardently wants to save everybody including the reprobate. The whole doctrine of salvation in-

²John Murray, “The Free Offer of the Gospel” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Great Britain: Banner, 1982), vol. 4, pp. 113-114.

cludes many different elements. So we ask the question, Does God take any of the steps? There are certain requisite measures, things that have to be done if man is to be saved. Does God do *all* of these things, or *many* of these things, or *some* of these things or *any* of these things? Because although salvation is one, it consists of many distinct elements, as we shall see.

Election

I ask you, What is the very beginning or origin of salvation? The very beginning of salvation, as the Bible teaches us, is God's eternal decree: some are elected and some are reprobated. We are told that God really wants to save everybody. But does God elect everybody to be saved? "No." Does God then leave the future of the non-elect indeterminate? Again the answer is "No." He does not leave it indeterminate. He eternally decrees—this is a terrible thing; we tremble at this—that the reprobate will live in sin all their days and they will be punished for their sin for the manifestation of God's justice (Rom. 9:21-22). Jesus says in Matthew 11:25-26 that God eternally purposed to hide the truth of the gospel from their hearts. And Jesus calls this good, that which pleases God. God judged that it was good not to save these people but to punish them for their sins. But, as I said, we are told that God sincerely and ardently wants to save the reprobate. The first response that we have to this idea, on the basis of our consideration of election and reprobation, is that it certainly does not look as if God wants to save the reprobate for He does not take the initial step (electing them), and without this initial step, they cannot be saved. Supposedly He really and ardently wants them for His people, but He does not choose them for His people. In fact, He decrees that they not be His people. He decrees that though some of them will hear the gospel, they will not believe it, and He actually blinds them and hides the truth from their hearts. God actually purposes that there are two types of people. There is the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). God Himself puts enmity, hatred and opposition between the two parties, and that is obviously a reflection of God's opposition to the seed of the serpent too. So if God does not decree to save the reprobate, then they cannot be saved. It is utterly impossible.

Atonement

Let us look at a second element in salvation. What is the basis or ground

of our salvation? The perfectly righteous life of Jesus Christ and His atoning death on the cross, for the Scriptures teach clearly that all men are guilty sinners worthy of everlasting punishment. “The soul that sinneth, it shall die” (Eze. 18:20). Therefore, as God teaches us in His Word, the only way of salvation is through the blood of Jesus Christ—propitiation, sacrifice, atonement and redemption in Christ and Christ alone. But the Scriptures teach that, according to God’s purpose, Jesus Christ died only for the elect. The Bible declares that He died for His own, for the many, for His friends, for the sheep. Jesus, after explaining that the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep, says to the Pharisees, “ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep” (John 10:26). Consider this syllogism: (1) Jesus said, “I am going to die for my sheep.” (2) He added, referring to the Pharisees, “You are not my sheep.” (3) Therefore Jesus did not die for them. They are goats. The shepherd died for the sheep and not for the goats. That is biblical and Reformed doctrine.

We are told, however, that God earnestly, ardently desires to save the reprobate. But a man cannot be saved without the blood of the cross being shed for him, and God did not send His Son to die for the sins of the reprobate. Or, to look at it from another perspective, the Bible teaches that the cross of Christ is a ransom. God’s people were in prison and Christ paid the ransom to release us. Now I’ll give you an analogy. Mr. X is in prison. If a ransom is paid, Mr. X will be released. Mr. Y says, “Mr. X, I really want to ransom you. I have the money at my disposal.” But although Mr. Y could have ransomed Mr. X, he chose not to. Thus we have to ask, Did Mr. Y really, ardently and sincerely desire to ransom Mr. X? The answer is “No,” because he did not do it.

Regeneration

Let us move on from election and atonement to the very beginning of the application of salvation—regeneration. The sinner is totally depraved, “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1), without any spiritual life and “wholly incapable of doing any good, and inclined to all wickedness” (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. 8). God quickens His elect, giving them life. The Bible calls this being “born again” or the “new birth.” It is evident that there is no salvation without the new birth, because Jesus says, “Ye must be born again” (John 3:7). If you are not born again, you are not saved.

We are told that God really desires and wants to save the reprobate. But does God regenerate them? No. Jesus declared, “The wind bloweth where

it listeth [or where it wills], and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is everyone that is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). The wind blows where it wants. You do not say to the wind, “Could you blow in that field, but not blow in my garden.” The wind does what it wills. Jesus here is drawing an analogy between the blowing of the wind and the blowing of the Holy Spirit in regeneration. He blows where He wills or wants or desires. The Greek word, *thelo*, encompasses all three of those ideas. The Spirit regenerates whom He wills or wants or desires. He desires to regenerate this one, and He actually regenerates them. He does not regenerate that one. Why? Because He does not desire, wish or want to regenerate that one. The Spirit blows where He wills, and He does not blow where He does not will to blow. But if God sincerely wishes to save everybody, why does the Spirit not blow where He supposedly wants to blow?

Spiritual Illumination

Let’s move on to another point: spiritual illumination or enlightenment, the ability to see the kingdom of heaven by faith. This is a vital part of salvation also. In Matthew 11:25-26, Jesus says, “I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because 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.”

So why did God hide the truth of the gospel from the reprobate? Answer: “for so it seemed good in thy sight.” The “for” gives us the reason. It seemed good in God’s sight. It was a sovereign choice of His, and it pleased Him. To say it pleased God means that God desired to do it; that is what He willed and wished and wanted to do. Now obviously it was not that He wanted or desired to reveal these things to the reprobate. He rather wanted and willed and desired to hide these things from them, as it seemed good to Him. In fact, the will of God regarding the reprobate in this life, is expressed very clearly for us in Romans 9:18: “whom he will he hardeneth.” This is the operation of God upon the reprobate in time. Election results, in time, in the softening and illumination of God’s people. The eternal decree of reprobation issues, in time, in the person being hardened. And that, too, is the argument of Romans 9.

Repentance and Faith

The way of salvation is the way of repentance and faith. Repentance is

turning from sin, and faith is trusting in Jesus Christ and receiving righteousness in Him. Advocates of the well-meant offer maintain that God really wants to save the reprobate. However, God does not give them repentance and He does not give them faith, divine gifts, wholly at His disposal. There is no salvation and there is no experience of salvation without these things. But if God *really* wanted to save them, why did He not give them repentance and faith?

Calling, Justification and Glorification

Let us consider that great apostolic summary of salvation in Romans 8:30: “Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.” Four things are spoken of here: predestination, calling, justification and glorification. Obviously God desires to save those He predestinated. Those He predestinated, those He also called, those He also justified, and those He also glorified. So those whom God predestinates or elects are those He wants to save; there is no doubt about that. Therefore He calls them, He justifies them, and He glorifies them. But God does not call, does not justify and does not glorify the reprobate. So what sense does it make to say that God desires to save the reprobate (i.e., to predestinate, call, justify and glorify them) when He does not do any of the things?

Membership in the (Invisible) Church

Salvation, Scripture teaches us, also includes membership in the (invisible) church of Jesus Christ. Christ is the head and His church is His body. The elect together constitute all the parts of His body, and it is a perfect body, a body in which all the parts are properly proportioned and fit together perfectly. This is a mighty work of God’s grace. Why would God want Christ’s body, which He has decreed to be perfect, to have added to it other parts and members? We have two ears. Would you want to have a third ear? We have one nose. Would you like a second one? Why would God decree and purpose a glorious church with a perfectly formed body and then desire to add to it other body parts which would deform the body?

To use another biblical figure for the church, the church is a temple, with every elect child of God a living stone in the temple. This temple is of perfect design and structure. But if God really wants to save everybody, then He wants to make them members and parts of His temple. Why would He want more stones for His temple than He in His wisdom has

determined? Where would all these stones go? To put these stones in the temple would spoil the temple. Why would God want that?

Covenant Friendship

The whole of salvation is summed up as covenant friendship with the true God. The free offer position holds that God ardently, sincerely wants to save the reprobate. This means He ardently and sincerely wants to make them His covenant friends. But He does not make them His covenant friends. Instead, He puts enmity between the seed of the woman (Christ and His church) and the reprobate seed of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). God wants to make them His friends, but He does not make them His friends. This presents God like a little boy in the playground who desperately wants so and so to be his friend. But he does not actually end up with that person becoming his friend at all. This cannot be Almighty God, the Lord of heaven and earth!

Listen to Psalm 11:5-7: “The wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth. Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire and brimstone, and an horrible tempest: this shall be the portion of their cup. For the righteous Lord loveth righteousness; his countenance doth behold the upright.”

Does this sound as if God wants to make the reprobate His friends? He says that His soul hates them, that is, God hates them in His inmost soul to the depths of His being and with all His heart.³ All mankind is polluted, filthy and defiled outside of Jesus Christ, and only the elect are loved in Christ who alone is righteous. Thus God pours out snares, fire, brimstone and an horrible tempest upon the wicked. This is the portion of their cup. This is a strange way for God to treat those whom He earnestly wants to become His friends!

to be continued (DV)

³Cf. John Calvin: “the reprobate are hateful to God, and with very good reason. For, deprived of his Spirit, they can bring forth nothing but reason for cursing” (*Institutes* 3.24.17).