

The Well-Meant Offer and Reprobation

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Reprobation and the Creeds

Historic and confessional Calvinism confesses not only the doctrine of election but also of reprobation or preterition. These two together are called double predestination. **The Canons of Dordt**, the original Five Points of Calvinism, teach the doctrine of reprobation as part of the doctrine of predestination in Head (**Chapter**) **I, Article 15**:

What peculiarly tends to illustrate and recommend to us the eternal and unmerited grace of election, is the express testimony of sacred Scripture, that not all, but some only are elected, while others are passed by in the eternal election of God; whom God, out of his sovereign, most just, irreprehensible and unchangeable good pleasure, hath decreed to leave in the common misery into which they have willfully plunged themselves, and not to bestow upon them saving faith and the grace of conversion; but leaving them in his just judgment to follow their own ways, at last for the declaration of his justice, to condemn and punish them forever, not only on account of their unbelief, but also for all their other sins. And this is the decree of reprobation which by no means makes God the author of sin (the very thought of which is blasphemy), but declares him to be an awful, irreprehensible, and righteous judge and avenger thereof.

The **Westminster Confession of Faith** teaches it alongside election in **Chapter III, Articles iii and vii**:

iii. By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life; and others foreordained to everlasting death.

vii. The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby He extendeth or withholdeth mercy, as He pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice.

Review of the Doctrine

Let us, then, briefly review the essentials of the doctrine of reprobation.

First, reprobation, like election, is a decree of God. It is not an act of God in history. It is not a reaction of God in time to men's sins. Like election, reprobation is *eternal*.

Second, it is *free and unconditional*. It is not based on foreseen unbelief, no more than election is based on foreseen faith. The Westminster Confession of Faith emphatically repudiates a conditional reprobation in Chapter **III**, Article **ii** - (see below).

Third, reprobation is a decree concerning specific persons: Esau, Pharaoh (**Rom. 9:13, 17**), Judas (**John 13:18, Acts 1:25**), Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli (**I Sam. 2:25**), etc. It is not just a general decree to damn whoever in time does not believe. In this also it is like election which is personal.

These are the essentials of the Reformed doctrine of reprobation. All these points together emphasize that reprobation, along with election, is sovereign.

Neglect of Reprobation

This doctrine is seriously neglected in Reformed churches today. It is seldom mentioned in preaching. There is little or nothing written of it in Reformed literature. So totally is the doctrine obscured today that it is with some surprise that one finds a whole chapter on it in a book like R.C. Sproul's, *Chosen of God*. Many, who are acquainted with Calvinism, would nevertheless have to say (like the disciples in Ephesus - Acts 19:1, 2) when told about this doctrine, "We had not so much as heard whether there be any reprobation."

We are convinced that one reason for this neglect is the fact that the doctrine of reprobation is incompatible with the widespread emphasis on the well-meant gospel offer. The teaching that God in the gospel intends and desires the salvation of all who hear is, on the face of it, not compatible with the teaching that God has eternally intended and willed the damnation of some.

Now, we believe that the theology of the well-meant offer is also in conflict with such doctrines as the simplicity and immutability of God, total depravity, particular redemption, and unconditional election. But it contradicts none of these other doctrines so plainly as it does the doctrine of reprobation. Reprobation means exactly and explicitly the opposite of the well-meant offer.

If you ask: "What should the preacher say concerning God's intention with respect to those who go lost?" the answer of those who teach the well-meant offer is: "God sincerely

seeks their salvation through the preaching of the Gospel.” The doctrine of reprobation says: “God has eternally and unconditionally determined them to damnation.” It ought to be evident that the two cannot possibly be reconciled.

Attempts to Reconcile Reprobation and the Well-meant Offer

(1) R. B. Kuiper

What do those who hold to the well-meant offer do, then? They do one of three things.

Some try to *hold both teachings in tension*. R. B. Kuiper in his book, *God-Centered Evangelism*, tries to do just that. Concerning the obvious contradiction between them he says:

“It has been argued that this doctrine (reprobation) rules out the universal and sincere offer of the gospel. If God decreed from eternity that some men would perish everlastingly, it is said to be inconceivable that he would in time sincerely invite all without distinction to everlasting life.” (p. 35).

What is his solution? This:

“We may as well admit, in fact, it must be admitted, that these teachings cannot be reconciled with each other by human reason. As far as human logic is concerned, they rule one another out. However, the acceptance of either to the exclusion of the other stands condemned as rationalism. Not human reason, but God’s infallible Word, is the norm of truth. That Word contains many paradoxes. The classical example is that of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. The two teachings now under consideration also constitute a striking paradox. To destroy a Scriptural paradox by rejecting one of its elements is to place human logic above the divine Word.” (p. 36).

By now most of the readers of the (British Reformed) Journal know what we think of this kind of “theology of paradox.” We believe: (1) that it makes theology impossible, for theology is the systematic (i.e., logical) arranging and harmonizing of the truths of Scripture; (2) that it makes apologetics (the defence of the truth) impossible in that no teaching can be rejected because it contradicts other doctrines or even Scripture itself; (3) it is disguised neo-orthodoxy and Barthianism, for the very heart of the “theology” of **Karl Barth** and his neo-orthodox disciples was this idea of paradox.

Barth and his disciples taught that “truth” does not have to make sense or mean anything. There can be contradictions and errors even in Scripture, but it does not matter since faith has nothing to do with understanding. In fact to try to understand and “put things together” - to try to make sense of them - is to destroy faith. Thus we can “believe” that God can be unchangeable and changeable at the same time. He can elect and reprobate our Lord Jesus Christ and all men with Him. Salvation can be for some and at the same time

for all. Faith, as a kind of “leap into the unknown” must not try to understand but only believe.

Surely those who hold to the well-meant offer would reject the indictment of neo-orthodoxy. Yet, in accepting the idea that there can be paradoxes, contradictions and disharmony in God and in His Word they nevertheless accept the fundamental premise of neo-orthodoxy.

What is more, in practice, the doctrine of reprobation gets very short shrift from those who are trying to hold it in tension with the idea that God sincerely desires and seeks the salvation of all men by the gospel. Who, in preaching and teaching, even if he believes in reprobation, is willing to go into a long, abstract and tedious explanation of how this is possible because there are two wills in God and that this somehow does not contradict His oneness, simplicity, and unchangeableness? It is easier just to pass over the doctrine of reprobation, especially because it is such a difficult doctrine. And that is exactly what happens. The biblical doctrine of reprobation is denied more often by complete silence than by the calumnies of those who hate it.

(2) Ian Murray and “Banner of Truth”

Silence is the second way of dealing with the contradiction between reprobation and the well-meant offer: silence. The doctrine of reprobation is simply hidden away and never spoken of as though it were some kind of “skeleton” in the Reformed closet. A good example of this approach is found in what the Banner of Truth Trust has done to Arthur Pink’s great book, *The Sovereignty of God*.

Many do not even know that the Banner edition of this book *has entirely removed Pink’s chapter on reprobation*, originally chapter 5, “The Sovereignty of God in Reprobation” without even a hint that it is gone (in his biography of Pink Ian Murray only refers to “some material” which has been edited out). It is true, the Banner and Mr. Murray try to justify this and other omissions, but there is really no other explanation than that they wish the testimony of Scripture concerning the doctrine of reprobation to be silenced.

In leaving out this whole chapter there is the question of whether it is ethical to edit a man’s works in that way, especially when one leaves the impression that the editing involves only some rather minor changes. That question we put aside. What we wish to show is that Murray’s explanation of the omission of the doctrine of reprobation holds no water.

It is in his biography of Pink that he tries to justify the omission. He does this on the ground of a supposed change in Pink’s views *regarding the well-meant offer* and human responsibility. It is interesting, to say the least, that it is the well-meant offer first of all and especially that Murray uses to justify the omission of the chapter on reprobation and this in spite of the fact that the chapter on reprobation does not even mention the offer of the gospel.

With regard to human responsibility the chapter on reprobation includes a strong defense of human responsibility, one of the strongest in the book. Pink certainly saw no conflict between it and reprobation. Nor is there any evidence whatsoever that Pink ever changed his strong belief in sovereign, double, unconditional reprobation. All Murray's attempts, therefore, to justify the omission of the doctrine of reprobation in the Banner edition of *The Sovereignty of God* fall to the ground. In light, therefore, of Murray's "explanation," is it really too much to think that the omission is due to the Banner's strong emphasis on the well-meant offer?

This kind of concealment is very prevalent. One would have a very hard time telling from the collected writings of most modern Reformed authors or from the collected sermons of most Reformed preachers that they believe the doctrine of reprobation, if indeed they do. It is, in most cases, deliberately or otherwise, a doctrine denied by utter silence.

(3) Berkouwer and Others.

There are also those, however, who solve the dilemma of trying to hold reprobation and a well-meant offer by denying or compromising the doctrine of reprobation. G. C. Berkouwer, the Dutch theologian, does this. He teaches that rejection (= reprobation), is no more than God's response in time to man's sin:

"Most prominent in this connection is the fact that Scripture repeatedly speaks of God's rejection as a divine answer in history, as a reaction to man's sin and disobedience, not as its cause." (*Divine Election*, p. 183).

He does this, too, in the interest of maintaining "a general offer of grace" in the gospel as the book, chapters 6 and 7 clearly show.

James Daane, a "Reformed" theologian from Fuller Theological Seminary has said much the same thing:

"This means that any doctrine of reprobation is illegitimate by biblical standards *except that which biblical teaching sanctions*: that he who rejects God, God rejects." (*The Freedom of God*, p. 200).

He too condemns decretal theology because it conflicts with a perceived universality of grace in the gospel:

"Commitment to the decree of decretal theology, however, exacts its toll: God loses that freedom, Christ is deprived of his preeminence in the decreed purpose of God, and the gospel is so restrictively defined that the church is no longer free to preach it as good news to 'all nations and to every creature'" (p. 203).

Others compromise the doctrine by teaching a conditional reprobation, i.e., that God

eternally rejects some because He foresaw and foreknew their unbelief. Even such a staunchly Reformed man as D. S. Clark seemed to teach this:

“When the Arminian says that faith and works constitute the ground of election we dissent, but if he says that foreseen unbelief and disobedience constitute the ground of reprobation we assent readily enough.” (*A Syllabus of Systematic Theology*, pp. 219, 220, quoted from **Boettner**, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, p. 114).

But this is an Arminian teaching explicitly rejected in the **Canons of Dordt**:

The true doctrine concerning election and rejection having been explained, the Synod rejects the errors of those who teach: that God, simply by virtue of his righteous will, did not decide either to leave anyone in the fall of Adam and in the common state of sin and condemnation, or to pass anyone by in the communication of grace which is necessary for faith and conversion
(**Canons I, Rejection of Errors, 8**).

The **Westminster Confession of Faith** also rejects conditional reprobation by insisting that both election and reprobation are “free” and by the plain statement that:

Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet hath He not decreed any thing because He foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions (**III, II**).

Finally, then, there are others who only teach a single predestination, that of election unto life. To them the words of **Boettner** apply:

“Those who hold the doctrine of Election but deny that of Reprobation can lay but little claim to consistency. To affirm the former while denying the latter makes the decree of predestination an illogical and lop-sided decree. The creed which states the former but denies the latter will resemble a wounded eagle attempting to fly with but one wing. In the interests of a “mild Calvinism” some have been inclined to give up the doctrine of Reprobation, and this term (in itself a very innocent term) has been the entering wedge for harmful attacks upon Calvinism pure and simple. ‘Mild Calvinism’ is synonymous with sickly Calvinism, and sickness, if not cured, is the beginning of the end.” (*The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, p. 105).

Not all, of course, who compromise the doctrine of double predestination do so in the interests of well-meant offer “theology.” Even they, however, destroy one of the great bulwarks that stands against the unbiblical and dangerous teaching that God loves and wants to save all men.

Conclusion

Quotations and instances could be multiplied, but the point is clear. The biblical doctrine of reprobation and the unbiblical doctrine of a well-meant offer of grace in the gospel are not compatible. The wide-spread abandonment and denial of the biblical doctrine of reprobation is in proportion to the adoption of the well-meant offer as an explanation of what God says in the Gospel. Nor will it do to try to hold both in tension. Something will give way, and in the church today it is the doctrine of sovereign, unconditional, double predestination which has given way.



“Now, if God invited all men to come to Him, and then shut the door of mercy against any who were desirous of entering, His invitation would be a mockery and unworthy of Himself; but **we insist on it, that He does not invite all men to come to Him in a saving way**, and that every individual person who is, through His gracious influence on the heart, made willing to come to Him, shall sooner or later be surely saved by Him, and that with an everlasting salvation.”

Jerome Zanchius : ABSOLUTE PREDESTINATION p.48, published by **Sovereign Grace Union**, London 1930. (In Henry Atherton’s glorious days!).

“he who threatens that when it shall rain on one city there will be drought in another (Amos iv: 7); and declares in another passage, that there will be a famine of the Word (Amos viii 11), **does not lay himself under a fixed obligation to call all equally**. And he who, forbidding Paul to preach in Asia, and leading him away from Bithynia, carries him over to Macedonia (Acts xvi 6), **shows that it belongs to him to distribute the treasure in what way he pleases**. But it is by Isaiah he more clearly demonstrates how he destines the promises of salvation specially to the elect (Isa. viii 16); for he declares that his disciples would consist of them only, and not **indiscriminately of the whole human race**. Whence it is evident that the doctrine of salvation, which is said to be set apart for the sons of the Church only, **is abused when it is represented as effectually available to all.....**It is not the purpose of the Prophet, however, to extenuate the guilt of men, when he states the source of their blindness to be, **that God deigns not to reveal his arm to them.....**”

John Calvin : INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION Book III ch. XXII para - graph 10.