

Are We Extremists?

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Introduction

Do you, like me, get frustrated by being dismissed as a “Hyper-Calvinist” when you discuss your faith with other brothers and sisters? For instance, you may be debating the current problems rampant within society and the church. This, of necessity, boils down to averring the relevance of a correct theology of God’s attributes, character and decrees. You then proceed to uphold the absolute sovereignty of God in His decrees, salvation and providence. But before long your position is simply trashed - negated as being “Hyper-Calvinistic”, therefore erroneous, therefore you are wrong, therefore the conversation is over. Occasionally, a coda to the argument will be that church history confirms that Calvin did not support such an extreme position anyway. It is especially saddening when professed reformed brothers argue in such a way. Before long you have a local reputation of being an extremist, a “Hyper-Calvinist”, and find yourself marginalised and out in the cold - even if you have never set foot in a properly Hyper-Calvinistic church or read any of their books.

Hyper-Calvinism

Are we adopting Hyper-Calvinistic theology in our distinctives? The essence of true Hyper-Calvinism is a fatalistic over-emphasis upon predestination which results in a failure to proclaim the Gospel indiscriminately. Hyper-Calvinists only share the Gospel message with those who appear to already be under Gospel convictions. So, if you sow the word of God on all types of soil, if you preach the gospel to anyone who hears, if you obey the command to, “*Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.*” (Mark 16:15), then you cannot be a Hyper-Calvinist in the proper sense. I submit, therefore, that this designation is today falsely applied to those of us who are guilty of nothing more than merely emphasising the sovereignty of God. But do our distinctives in asserting the importance of God’s sovereignty make us “extremist-Calvinists”?

Extreme-Calvinism

Firstly, I need to clarify what these controversial distinctives of ours are. They are the following. God's sovereignty is a crucial Biblical doctrine which undergirds virtually everything else in Biblical teaching. Underlying our experience of salvation is the unconditional election of saints. This, in turn, rests upon a double predestination affecting all men before the world was made, dividing mankind into the elect and the reprobate. The immutability of God means that he cannot love all men, cannot offer salvation to everyone who hears the Gospel message because Christ did not die for every person who ever lived. The message of the Gospel, therefore, has a twofold effect: a hardening to those who will never believe because they were never chosen and an enlightening to those being drawn by the Holy Spirit.

So, to summarise, the main elements which cause offence to some are:

- an emphasis upon God's sovereignty over man's ability
- double-predestination and subsequent reprobation
- God's particular love to some not all
- limited atonement
- the hardening effect of Gospel preaching to reprobates

The key criticism of our position is that *we deny a universalism in God's purposes*. Such a strict particularism is offensive to men and a denial of a God who loves everyone.

Instead of analysing and exegeting the multitudes of texts which support these propositions (which I have done elsewhere), I intend to look at the key principle involved in the controversy by understanding the ways of God in history - discriminating selection.

The essence of our distinctive propositions is the principle of divine choosing: does God predestine the salvation of some or offer eternal life to all who hear; does God love only the elect or the whole world; did Christ die for all or just some? We need to determine whether there is a *selectiveness* in the purposes of God or whether he acts *universally*.

Analysis of God's purposes in redemptive history

Before God selects a material creature he creates a race of spiritual beings who will be his messengers and servants. From this race he elects (I Tim. 5:21) a proportion but allows the rest to rebel and form a race of enemies. These rebel angels become demons and are doomed in his purposes, there is no salvation for them, they are reserved for the lake of fire (Jude 6; Rev. 20:12-14).

When the plan of human salvation begins, God chooses a small planet which orbits a sun of very minor magnitude which is a component of a mediocre galaxy. Despite the current fashion for speculating about life in many other unobserved planets outside the solar system - which are only unproved speculations thus far - God's word gives us no encouragement to believe that there is life anywhere else or that he has redemptive purposes in other star systems. Indeed, the fact that he chooses the earth to form the focus of his universe-creation narrative and that he sends his Son to die for its inhabitants suggests that there is no life elsewhere. Millions of suns, endless galaxies, a massive universe, a huge solar system ... but he *selects* only one minor planet.

Of all the varied life-forms on this planet, God *selects* only one to have a rational existence, in whose heart he plants thoughts of eternity (Eccl. 3:11).

Throughout the generations of the life of this creature, a continual process of *selection* occurs. The sacrifice of the first son (Cain) is rejected whilst that of the second (Abel) is accepted. Noah's family of eight persons is saved from global destruction whilst all the earth's other inhabitants are drowned. One man (Abraham) is given a covenant and an inheritance while the rest of civilisation (and that of an accomplished civilisation too) is passed by. His nephew (Lot) and some of his family are delivered from destruction whilst the population of two large cities face doom. One son of the covenant father is rejected (Ishmael); the other is chosen (Isaac). The first-born grandson is rejected (Esau) while the younger grandson is granted the birthright and inheritance (Jacob).

Peter refers to two of these cases - Noah and Lot - as examples for us (II Pet. 2:5-9). Indeed, the destruction of the wicked in Sodom and Gomorrah is also specifically stated to be an example of God's purposes in the Gospel, as they are models of the fate of future ungodly persons. In commenting upon this Peter says, "*the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgement.*" The unjust, the unrighteous, are reserved, kept under guard, for judgement; there is no transfer from one state to another. The godly are chosen to be delivered and the wicked are reserved for judgement from eternity. Jude 6-7 also refers to Sodom and Gomorrah as examples in the immediate context of the rebel angels being reserved for eternal judgement. These key Biblical models are examples of a divine selective choice.

The process of selection is seen *par excellence*, however, in the prime example God specifically provided as an object lesson in the plan of salvation. Of all the nations in the world, some of who were at the height of their cultural development and who had once known monotheism, God chose the smallest, weakest and most enslaved people (Deut. 7:7). All the great states with their vast populations were rejected but Israel is included in God's covenant. No universalism here!

In the course of providing a deliverance for this new nation of Israel, God miraculously leads them into a land where several long established nations and at least one old empire - the Hittite empire - had long dwelt. These existing nations are to be ruthlessly destroyed according to the command of God for their wickedness. This chosen people did not enter these lands with a message of universal love from the God only they had access to. No, their message was of hate, judgement and condemnation, without mixture. Israel actually suffered punishment and military setbacks when she failed to comply with God's commands.

Yet the process continues. Within this covenant nation great tribes are disenfranchised while small ones are chosen. The nation is split, one half is lost to Assyria while the other is rescued. And later, most of this half is

also lost and just a remnant is delivered out of Babylon. Of all the nation's kings only a very few found favour with God. Being a priest or a prophet was also no guarantee of acceptance as many were condemned. Divine selection continued throughout Old Testament history, even amongst God's own chosen people (Jude 5). We do not see God working according to universalistic methods *even within his own covenant nation*. In the New Testament administration of the Gospel this process continues.

Even before the cross Jesus made many statements in this regard which bewildered and divided his followers. In John 6 Jesus gave a perplexing speech to a crowd who had followed Him to see another miracle after being fed miraculously. He deliberately emphasised His divine mission from heaven, which was exceptionally difficult for Jews to take in, and was ultimately why He was crucified. When the people protested about this He blatantly told them that they could not understand because they were not being drawn to Him by God. Jesus then made it harder still and spoke metaphorically of giving them His flesh to be eaten and His blood to be drunk. This was extreme provocation to Jews who cannot even consume animal blood, let alone human. Jesus deliberately offended the crowds to filter away those not selected.

Jesus elsewhere explains why He acted in such a manner. Several times Jesus mentioned that His message was deliberately hidden from many, for *"it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given"* (Matt. 13:10-16; Luke 19:42; John 12:40-41). This was why He spoke in parables. There was a dichotomy between the elect and the reprobate - one would see and hear; the other would not. The selective method employed is seen in this, that *"many are called but few are chosen."* (Matt 20:16; 22:14) Jesus did not welcome disciples universally. Jesus only fully explained and revealed Himself to twelve people, and even of these one was rejected and condemned. Of His many followers, only 120 were to be found gathered in His name in an upper room awaiting the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Analysis of God's purposes in church history

In the apostolic expansion of the Gospel, after the cross, the process continues. Although huge numbers of people are converted, the process of divine selection in the reception of the Gospel undergirds Gospel success. Many are saved in one place while virtually none are in another. In Antioch of Pisidia the Jews reject the Gospel but a crowded audience of Gentiles receive it; but even then only those appointed to eternal life are saved (Acts 13:48). Of all the women spoken to near a Philippian river, only Lydia received the word because the Lord opened her heart (Acts 16:14). Business leaders and magistrates in Philippi fail to respond to the Gospel but a desperate jailer is converted along with his family (Acts 16:33).

Finally, when we look at the missionary expansion of the church after the death of the apostles, we notice a divine selection going on. If we believe in a sovereign God who ordains all things, especially the bounds and influence of nations (Acts 17:26) and the days of men (Ps. 139:5, 16), then we have to acknowledge that church development throughout hundreds of years is in God's hands. In this time there are some intense periods of missionary activity and many quieter ones. There are nations that readily accept the Gospel and found their laws and culture upon it but others which ignore or oppose it vehemently. Some tribes and nations hear nothing of the Gospel for nearly 1700 years (e.g., many native American tribes).

Although there were initial advances in the East by some apostles like Thomas and later missionary journeys by others, the orient was largely devoid of the Christian faith for hundreds of years. Despite the sterling efforts of some great missionaries like Carey, Judson and Morrison, India is still dominated by Islam and Hinduism; the far east by Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, ancestor worship and many smaller religions. Though there is a large Christian church (mostly underground) in China, it was only slightly affected by the Gospel for hundreds of years. In the extreme West, the continents of North and South America, plus all the islands off their coasts, knew nothing of the Bible until the arrival of the Spaniards - and even then it was the errors of Romanism which gained hold for another

200 years. Although Africa had a very significant Christian presence north of the Sahara at the beginning of the church age, this was forcibly closed down with the Moslem invasions and most of Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa, knew little or nothing of the Gospel until the great modern missionary advances. The Middle East, despite being the birthplace of Christianity, has only a 3.5% Christian presence, down from 11.6% in 1900 and statisticians expect the faith to completely vanish by 2040 if the trend continues.¹

We need no further evaluations, for the point has surely been made. Under the providential hand of God, some nations knew nothing of the Gospel for hundreds of years, then there are missionary successes and churches planted which gain a comparatively small, but faithful, footholding. Other nations are still surrounded in almost total darkness, while others have a traditional form of Christianity which finally condemns Biblical, reformed doctrine. Even some European countries are dark places for the truth, despite the existence of a proliferation of Bibles. *If God is Lord, then we are seeing a selection going on in history.* God could have ensured that American Indians heard the Gospel if he chose to - if a Viking called Leif Ericksson could get there, then so could a missionary. Apart from some notable individual efforts, main missionary advances did not even take place until after 1790. As well as individual selection for salvation, there appears to be seasons of national selection too. God withholds the truth from some places and showers it on others. For some reason, in the providence of God, Great Britain has had a strong and continual Christian presence since Roman times - a privilege which should promote thanksgiving, and encourage responsible action.

Conclusion

Throughout history we see a division taking place within mankind. There are those who respond to the word of God and those who do not. But this response is not precipitated by man; it is determined and instigated by God himself. (John 6:44, 65).

¹ Source, *Barnabus Fund.*

God does not act according to universalistic purposes but clearly discriminates according to a pre-determined plan and decree. He never intended to save everyone so it is pointless pretending that he does so in the proclamation of the Gospel. How viciously cruel is it to preach that God loves everyone and wants everyone to be saved, when the preacher knows very well that God has discriminated throughout history and has prepared hell for those he has not chosen.

Far from it being extremist to teach a particular love in the purpose of God rather than universalism, it is consistent not only with many Biblical texts, but with the entire thrust of the divine purpose in redemptive history and the character of God himself. Noah wasn't told to tell the world God loved them. Joshua was not told to offer mercy to the Canaanites. The apostles never preached the love of God for all in their sermons as recorded in Acts. We are nowhere commanded to tell men today that God loves them, because scripture never states that God loves everyone, affirming rather that he hates certain types of people and only loves the elect in Christ.² Our position is not extreme; it is merely biblical. Surely, if anything, it is the rabid and unashamed universalism of much of contemporary Calvinism that is extremist and 'hyper' – Hyper-Biblical!

This article was authored by Mr. Paul Fahy, founder and chief writer for "Understanding Ministries". It has been abridged from a longer original of the same title with the permission of the author.

² God hates all sorts of wicked-doers: Ps 5:5; 11:5; Prov. 16:16-19; Rev. 2:6 even religious leaders Zech. 11:8; Jer. 44:2-4. God hates wicked thinkers: Zech. 8:17. God abhors the disobedient amongst his historic chosen people: Lev. 26:27-30; Hos. 9:15. God despises the opposers of his people: Ps. 53:5. God hates individuals: Mal. 1:3. God hates certain nations: Lev. 20:23. God hates teachers of doctrinal error: Rev. 2:15. God hates false religion: Deut. 12:31; 16:22. God hates superficial religion: Is. 1:14; Amos 5:21. Only once is there any implication that God loves all, that is John 3:16, but this cannot mean a universal love since John has spoken against this e.g., John 6 and John 3:36 a few verses later. Further, if "world" meant everyone in 3:16, it must mean everyone in 3:17 and this would mean that there is no hell and everyone is saved. Obviously, "world" in v16 is used in a restrictive sense as in 12:19 and many other places. Calvin says that the word "world" was used here to show Jews that salvation included other races.