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**Divine Election and Man's Culpability
for Rejecting the Gospel**

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Introduction – Human Responsibility and Salvation

It is generally accepted that human beings are responsible beings. However, they are also deeply depraved beings. They are capable of horrific deeds among themselves and to their environment. The Christian viewpoint is that they need salvation which, according to the reformed view, is from God. If God brings about salvation through his divine election, is it then still possible to speak of human responsibility? If and when human beings reject the Gospel, do they have any culpability? Have human beings then not become beings without choices, used by God in a way that allows them no free will of their own and saved or rejected by God at his own will? These questions will always be put to the reformed theologian.

¹ His books include *A Theology of Christian Mission: What Should the Church Seek to Accomplish?* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008, 201p).

² See www.uovs.ac.za.

Human responsibility is such an essential aspect of humanity – separating human beings from other earthly beings - that it is impossible to think of human beings as having rights, choices and even the possibility to do wrong if they do not have responsibility. Salvation in reformed circles has always been accepted as obtained through faith in Jesus Christ. It is important to reject any notion that human beings can become their own vehicles of salvation. Salvation was made possible in Christ and God made it possible by virtue of the death of his own son on the Cross and by virtue of the Resurrection.

A. Election and responsibility

There is a link between election and responsibility because election has always been viewed as God’s way of dealing with human beings in sin. Human responsibility and the potential to deal with problems have always been regarded as part of the human predicament. Election from God is God’s decision to deal with human beings in such a way that they can at least be saved and enjoy a full life. However, in some circles election can be considered a kind of judgment by God on human beings with or without their own responsibility. In that case, human beings are often regarded as so depraved and in sin that they cannot at all be saved, unless God elects them and leads them to salvation. The question remains whether, if election is eternal and God decided to choose some people for his heaven, human beings have any culpability for rejecting the gospel? Should it not rather be stated that whatever the possibilities are, God in eternity determines the fate of human beings?

B. Views on Human Responsibility

1. Calvin on Human Responsibility

Calvin viewed mankind as totally fallen in sin. His theology proves the radicality of sin and the fact that human beings are totally lost. Human beings cannot save themselves; they are totally in sin. In his commentary on Romans, Calvin (1947:71) explains that human beings are justly condemned:

It hence clearly appears what the consequence is of having this evidence—that men cannot allege anything before God’s tribunal for the purpose of showing that they are justly condemned. Yet let this difference be remembered, that the manifestation of God, by which he makes his glory known in his creation, is,

with regard to the light itself sufficiently clear; but that on account of our blindness, it is not found to be sufficient.

Human beings can neither change their own ways nor become new people unless it is through the grace of God in Jesus Christ, who became a curse for them because he was crucified and cursed in that sense, thus becoming the blessing and salvation for people.³ Therefore Calvin finds it necessary to be elected in Christ Jesus in order to be saved.⁴ This radical election in Jesus Christ is crucial for the new life in Christ and the new way of living. This, however, did not mean that Calvin rejected the notion of human responsibility.⁵ For him, human beings remain responsible for their entire being and actions, and for what happens to them. They remain responsible in the sense that they are totally responsible for their sin.⁶ They cannot lay the reality of sin at God's door. They themselves must accept that they are the ones who sinned, not God. God created people, human beings, in a wonderful way. Human beings are responsible for their sin.

Calvin (1950:931, Inst 21.7) clearly demonstrates his view:

As Scripture, then, clearly shows, we say that God once established by his eternal and unchangeable plan those whom he long before determined once for all to receive into salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, he would devote to destruction. We assert that, with respect to elect, this plan was founded upon his freely given mercy, without regard to human worth; but by his just and irreprehensible but incomprehensible judgment he has barred the door of life to those whom he has given over to damnation. Now among the elect we regard the call as a testimony of election. Then we hold justification another sign of his manifestation, until they come into the glory in which the fulfilment of that election lies. But as the Lord seals his elect by call and justification, so,

³ Warfield (1980:135) shows that Calvin made it very clear that human beings are to be blamed for their predicament but that they are unable to know God fully unless the true revelation of the Bible enlightens them in Christ. Kruithof (1949:33 following) refers to the fact that human beings were free and decided to turn against God but that God's redemption in Christ is the full and very answer to original sin. Wendel (1984:176 following) explains that Calvin viewed the fact that God always remained totally just in the election of the righteous and rejection of the lost not negotiable.

⁴ Cunningham (1989:432) explains that Calvin's view is that the divine decrees or purposes with regard to everything that is to come to pass are unconditional and unchangeable.

⁵ Potgieter (2004:157) refers to the fact that Calvin did deem the lost responsible: "The problem with those who do not know Christ, says Calvin, is that they think that any zeal for religion, however preposterous, is sufficient. But they do not realize that true religion ought to be conformed to God's will as to a universal rule...(*Inst.* 1.4.3) In this way they entangle themselves in such a huge mass of errors that blind wickedness stifles and finally extinguishes those sparks which once flashed forth to show them God's glory."

⁶ Calvin (948:72) refers to the fact that Christ is not to be blamed for sin: "Christ did not bring sin, but unveiled it; he did not take away righteousness, but stripped the Jews of a false disguise."

by shutting off the reprobate from knowledge of his name or from the sanctification of his Spirit, he, as it were, reveals these marks what sort of judgement awaits them.

2. The Canons of Dort

Although the canons of Dort clearly mention that salvation is totally from God, it is also evident that human beings cannot excuse themselves from the just judgment of God. God has the right to judge. Human beings are totally depraved and in sin of their own accord and not of the making of God. Human beings are totally responsible beings but they also sinned in Adam and ceded any possibility of a free will and salvation of their own accord. God's gift of salvation is free in Christ and through grace alone, but human beings rejected this and cannot blame God because they are in sin of their own accord.

Article 5 clearly states: "The cause or guilt of this unbelief as well as of all other sins is no wise in God, but in man himself; whereas faith in Jesus Christ and salvation through him is the free gift of God ..." (Doctrinal Standards 1970:45).

However, article 6 clearly states that God is the one who decides: "That some receive the gift of faith from God, and others do not receive it, proceeds from God's eternal decree ... According to which decree He graciously softens the hearts of the elect, however obstinate, and inclines them to believe; while He leaves the non-elect in his just judgment to their own wickedness and obduracy" (Doctrinal Standards 1970:45).

The canons of Dort have difficulty in explaining the issue of human responsibility. Although it has been decreed by God who will be saved and who rejected, human beings remain totally responsible if they are rejected. God leaves them in their own sin which is totally of their own accord.

This endeavour to verbalise the biblical view of human responsibility and God's eternal decree remains difficult to resolve. Berkouwer (1992:136) explains that grace is important for the canons of Dort. No human merit is acceptable, but human beings are fully responsible for their sin. Faith in Christ is the way to salvation.

3. Paul and Human Responsibility

It is also essential to turn to Paul and the question of man's culpability for rejecting the gospel. This is clearly illustrated in Paul's Letter to the Romans. Romans 1 clearly shows that human beings

cannot say that they have no knowledge of God.⁷ Even though they may know God only through his creation, they must at least respect Him and acknowledge that their salvation comes through God and that He is a living God. Their responsibility to honour God as the truth and as the one who is King of heaven and earth is clearly explained in Romans 1.⁸ This issue is further explained in Romans 5 when Paul discusses the relation between those who have been saved in Christ as the second Adam and those who reject the gospel because of sin.⁹

Schreiner (2001:149-150) explains this relation:

The Adam-Christ contrast should also be understood in redemptive-historical terms. Adam introduced the age of sin and death through his sin, while Christ inaugurated the new age of righteousness and life through his death and resurrection. All human beings are either in Adam or in Christ. They belong to

⁷ Kruger (2003:604) is of the opinion that God's revelation in the creation, preservation and government of the universe referred to in article 2 of the Belgic confession is adequate to bring human beings to the stage where they are able to find glorify and thank God. Because this is so they are fully responsible for their own rejection of God. Barret (1984:35) states that Paul does not want to establish a natural theology in Rom 1 v19: "He is concerned with the moral principles of God's judgement ..." and in (1984:36) he states: "God may rightly visit men with wrath because, though they have not had the advantage of hearing the Gospel, they have rejected that rudimentary knowledge of God that was open to them." Fitzmyer (1993:271) explains that, according to Paul, no-one has any excuse for not acknowledging God: "The sin of pagans against God stems from their suppression of the truth about him in their lives, and as a result their misguided minds have become steeped in idolatry. They have turned from the glorification of the immortal God to the worship of images of mortal creatures, human or animal. Thus pagan idolatry has become the 'big lie', and pagans have no excuse; their godlessness and wickedness have made them objects of divine wrath." Schreiner (1998:86-88) refers to the fact that the gentiles should acknowledge the glory and honour of God through his creation, but fail to do so: "Such knowledge of God probably includes knowing him as creator since the power and divinity of God are known through the world he has made" (1998:86). Morris (1988:78) explains that the general attitude of unrighteousness of the gentiles leads them to expression in deeds opposed to God's purposes. Jewett (2007: 151) refers to human's culpability: "The gospel therefore reveals wrath, not simply by reminding of future punishment or of 'the inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe', but by indicating the culpability of the human race at so egregious a level as to make retribution morally necessary." Ziesler (1989:77) is of the opinion that Paul clearly explains the culpability of all human beings in Romans. Dunn (1988:73) states concerning Rom 1 v24: "But now the spiral of man's sin and sinning is given a sharper twist: God determines the consequences of man's sin. 'God handed them over'; the word denotes a measured and deliberate act, but also the resigning of direct control over what is thus passed on. It is this last aspect which is the clue to what follows. They wanted to pursue the desire of their own hearts, and so God gave them over to what they desired; he did not, it should be noted, give them their desires, rather he gave them to what they desired and the consequences of what they desired (more explicit in vv26-27)."

⁸ Dunn (2005:404) refers to the fact that Paul clearly portrays Christ as judge. Although as: "agent for and intercessor before God."

⁹ Canfield (1985:121) explains: "Condemnation does indeed result for all men from Adam's sin, but this condemnation is no absolutely irreversible, eternal fact: on the contrary, Christ indeed already begun the process of its reversal, and therefore the 'all men' of the subordinate clause, while it really does mean 'all men', is no eternally unaltered quantity." See also Dunn (1988:289).

this present evil age or to the age to come. Paul does not explain sin and death solely or finally in terms of individual decisions. Human beings enter the world destined for death because they are in Adam, and only through Christ can they participate in the blessings of the coming age ... The verse indicates that those who are in Adam are slaves to sin and as such are loyal servants to its mastery.

The abundance of grace is so important in the Letter to the Romans that it must be established that God does not reject human beings without taking their responsibility into account. Therefore Paul is very clear on the aspect that man has full responsibility for rejecting the gospel. The grace of God is tremendous and God wishes to save human beings but if we do not come to God, if we sin against God, we are responsible for our own sin and we have to realise that fully.¹⁰ Paul's explanation of Israel is important.¹¹ He finds this issue of Israel rejecting the gospel difficult to understand and, although he emphasises that it is needed in Christ in order to be saved, he also enables human beings to live in a relation with God in the salvation which comes from Christ. He clearly states that human beings cannot save themselves. This is also clearly explained in the case of Pharaoh and the potter. The potter uses clay and as the clay cannot ask the potter to make something else, so human beings are nothing before God and they cannot come before God and say that God has to use them in another way.¹² But this does not take away human

¹⁰ Kim (1981:288) explains that God justifies the ungodly. This implies that grace is important: "That no man is justified by works of the laws but through God's saving act in Christ, and that he is therefore justified as ungodly, means that justification is by the grace of God." See also Barret (1984:116) on justification. Fitzmyer (1993:406) refers to the fact that the new life in Christ is the basis of hope against the baleful consequences of Adam's sin for all historical humanity.

¹¹ Schreiner (2001:244) is of the opinion that in Rom 9-11 Paul is concerned with Israel's *salvation*. And that one ... "must believe in and confess Christ *to be saved*". Dunn (1988b:549-550) refers strongly to the fact that Israel failed not God. Israel according to the flesh failed. The Gospel of salvation triumphed.

¹² Calvin (1950:948) refers strongly to the fact that God decides on human fate: "And Paul does not, as do those I have spoken of, labor anxiously to make false excuses in God's defence; he only warns that it is unlawful for the clay to quarrel with its potter [Rom. 9:20]. Now how will those who do not admit that they are condemned by God dispose of Christ's statement: "Every tree that my ... Father has not planted will be uprooted." [Matt. 15:13] This plainly means that all those whom the Heavenly Father has not deigned to plant as sacred trees in his field are marked and intended for destruction. If they say that this is no sign of reprobation, there is nothing so clear that it can be proven to them." Schreiner (1998:518) refers to the way in which Paul uses the reference to the potter and clay: "Similarly, the choice of one for eschatological honor and the other for judgment from the same lump indicates that those chosen had no special merits or distinctiveness that accounted for their being chosen. Those who were chosen for salvation were selected on the basis of God's sovereign and free good pleasure." Schreiner (1998:523) explains that the glory of God is displayed to all people through both his wrath and his mercy, especially through the latter which is clearer in the light of his wrath.

responsibility; even in Paul it is well established that human beings have to confess that their salvation is from God and that they will find the salvation in Jesus Christ and only through him can they be fully saved and come into the relation with the living God.¹³

The importance of faith is clearly explained by Witherington 111 (1998:275):

Pistis, which can mean both faith and faithfulness, is a crucial term for Paul-the term by which he links the story of Christ and the story of Christians. Christ is a paradigm of faithful living. Because of his faithful act of dying for sin, believers can die to sin; because he was raised, believers can arise and live in newness of life. Christ's faithfulness unto death can also be emulated by Christians under pressure and persecution. Those who have gained Christ have gained not only the benefits of the story of his life and death; they have been grafted into that story, so that by analogy the pattern is repeated in their lives. Christ's death as both experience and pattern norms the life of Christians and guides them on the path to greater Christlikeness.

Are human beings then responsible for rejecting the gospel when they do not accept the fullness of new life in Jesus Christ? Are they culpable of what they are doing? Paul makes it clear that human beings must accept that they come to God only through his son Jesus Christ. Being accursed because of sin, they need the salvation in Jesus Christ. Therefore in Paul's theology human beings are culpable for rejecting the gospel; in their relation with God, they rejected the fullness of the salvation that is possible in Jesus Christ.

Westerholm explains (2004:357) how Paul views the aspect of faith¹⁴ playing a crucial role:

¹³ Horrel (2006:72) explains as follows: "Paul never set out an answer to this apparent tension in his thought; nor did he wrestle explicitly with the issue of the relationship between human decision and the sovereignty of God. For Paul both seemed important; people were urged to respond to the gospel (e.g. 2 Cor. 5.20), and yet God's saving purposes are presented as ultimately unstoppable (Rom 9, 16; 11, 29-36)." Morris (1988: 425) also refers to the similarity and difference in the way God deals with Israel and the gentiles - both are characterised by their disobedience but through the disobedience of the Jews the gentiles are saved and through God's mercy to the gentiles the Jews will be saved. God uses human decision in his own way but human beings remain responsible for their decisions. Jewett (2007:617) refers to the ignorance of the Jews as fundamental misperception of what God wills for the world.

¹⁴ Powers (2001:231) also refers to the unity with Christ for salvation: "The corporate understanding that Christian believers are united with Christ is one of the essential foundations of the earliest believers' conception of salvation". The notion that the believers and Christ form a corporate unity is the foundational framework into which the salvifically significant, pre-Pauline "dying for" and "surrender" formulas are inserted. It is nearly impossible to make logical sense of Paul's usage of these formulas unless one recognizes Paul's underlying presupposition of the unity between Christ and the believers. Because of the corporate unity between Jesus and the believers, the grace which God bestowed upon Jesus by vindicating him and raising him from the dead is shared by the believers. [Footnote continued on next page ...]

Both acceptance and rejection of the truth are all-encompassing: life is lived either in the acknowledgement and service of the true and living God or in defiance of the truth. Those who reject the gospel act entirely in character when they do so; they are, in effect, refusing to abandon life they have already adopted, in which neither acknowledging nor pleasing God plays a role (4:5;5:7). Their unbelief is in itself disobedience, and disobedience shown in their actions is merely an expression of their unbelief (cf. 2 Thess.1:8; 2:10, 12). Conversely, those who respond in faith to the gospel are thereby turning *away* from a life in disobedience to one oriented around service to God (1 Thess. 1; 8-9).

C. Human Beings and Their Potential to Make Moral Decisions

Human beings in their essence have to be responsible beings. As soon as they reject the notion of responsibility, human beings are degraded to mere animals or plants. The moment they have responsibility, they can be called upon to act responsibly. Once they are called upon to act responsibly when asked to live and to be beings according to the responsibility God has given them, human beings can be accepted as responsible beings.¹⁵

D. Mission and Election

Mission and election are therefore of the utmost importance. Is it at all possible to call people to responsibility if they are already rejected by God, and if they reject the gospel can God hold them to account? Or was it all established before time? The Biblical view on

Barth (1962: 533) explains: “Now there being as the children of God is not empty; it does not have to be accidentally or arbitrarily filled out. It is not idle; it does not have to become active. It implies from the very first and therefore unavoidably a definite situation and position in which they are placed, a definite character which they are given, a definite function which is committed to them, a definite action which they are commissioned to perform. The nature is fashioned and characterised by the fatherly basis and origin of their existence. If only in analogy to the existence of Jesus Christ, yet very really in this analogy they, too, as the children of God exist in repetition, confirmation and revelation not only of the matter but also of the will and act of God as the One from whom they derive.”

¹⁵ New Testament references to people acting and being held responsible include the rich young ruler where human responsibility and culpability in rejecting the Gospel is an issue in his way of approaching Jesus. He is of the opinion that he holds to the commandments of God - living responsibly. But when Jesus explains that the fullness of life is only in Him and in following Him, the young man walks away. He had the full possibility of answering Jesus' call but rejected it. Rejecting the gospel is totally his own fault. In Jesus' own words it was written that the man of perdition will go to eternal judgment. Had Judas any possibility to change this? Was it possible for him to do anything else? Although it was written, Judas still remains responsible for his rejection of Jesus. Pilate as judge also had the possibility to judge fairly. He rejected the possibility to accept Jesus as Son of God and King. His own ruling judges Himself. Ananias and Sapphire had the possibility to live with the community. They rejected God's full presence. The people stoning Steven had all the time to come to Christ. They heard and saw his servants' deeds and words. In the Old Testament God said that he hardened Pharaoh's heart. Had Pharaoh any doing in his own downfall? He did not as the king of Nineveh change his view totally.

this issue is clear. God does not want anybody to be rejected. In his freedom he comes to people, in his acceptance of Christ as the salvation of people, Christ is our salvation. Christ being our salvation we have to come to him and become new people. Only human beings reject this total new possibility. Rejection does not come from God in the sense that he rejects people because he wishes to save people and bring them into his fold and give them the fullness of his grace. The rejection of the gospel is therefore not something decided upon by God because he wanted to reject some people.

Man's culpability for rejecting the gospel rests totally with him. In Christ: the One for the others, the One who yielded himself for others, the One in the place of the others. God stretches out his hand to human beings. He wishes and appeals to them to come to him. 2 Corinthians 5v11-21 makes this clear - God calls to people. Paul pleads with them to be reconciled with God. This plea for reconciliation is establishing the fact that the rejection of the gospel is of man's own will and being. God's election is God's wonderful way of saving people but man is totally culpable for rejecting the gospel: rejecting the fullness of the salvation in Jesus Christ, the fullness of the call to God in Jesus Christ, the fullness of the radical salvation that is only possible in and through Jesus Christ himself.

First, the Bible is clear on human beings' guilt before God. God did not instigate human beings to sin. God is not the author of sin. God created in freedom so that human beings can be free people before God and not merely higher forms of animals. This radical freedom of human beings must always be respected.

Secondly, God was not caught unawares by the sin of human beings. In his just judgement He saves and condemns in justice. God remains the only true judge and the only true saviour.

Thirdly, all election and rejection of people must always be viewed in Jesus Christ. Rejection is obvious in the crucified One, salvation is complete in the risen Christ.

Fourthly, human beings remain responsible beings. They remain accountable for rejecting the fullness of the new life in Christ. The way in which this is worked out is not explained fully in the Bible. God holds them responsible.

Finally, the fullness of new life is only possible in Christ Himself.

Conclusion

The eternal election and rejection of God is not a computer math adding up or not adding up. The Bible clearly teaches human responsibility and eternal election. The most wonderful glorious God in his majesty created human beings in freedom; they fell into sin of their own accord. God is the Saviour. He wishes them well. His salvation is complete in Christ, the One for others.

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