

Double Predestination and Romans 9:21-24

The ninth chapter of Paul's epistle to the Romans is one of the most hotly debated New Testament passages. It is a pillar proof text for many Calvinists for both the doctrines unconditional election and total depravity. Some Calvinists take the further position that Romans 9:21-24 not only teaches unconditional election, but double-predestination. Before turning to the text, it should be noted that there does not seem to be an agreed definition of double-predestination. R.C. Sproul, who himself holds to double-predestination, calls the definition of some a caricature of the doctrine, usually explained by them as follows: "God *positively* and *actively* intervenes in the lives of the elect to bring them to salvation. In the same way God *positively* and *actively* intervenes in the life of the reprobate to bring him to sin."¹ In contrast to the caricature of the doctrine, Sproul clarifies his view of the Reformed version of the doctrine: "In the Reformed view God from all eternity decrees some to election and positively intervenes in their lives to work regeneration and faith by a monergistic work of grace. To the non-elect God withholds this monergistic work of grace, passing them by and leaving them to themselves. He does not monergistically work sin or unbelief in their lives."² I will argue below that Romans 9:21-24 teaches neither version of double-predestination.

The text of Romans 9:21-24 reads: "21 Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? 22 *What*

¹ Sproul, R.C. "Double Predestination." Available at http://www.the-highway.com/DoublePredestination_Sproul.html. Accessed 8 December, 2009.

² *Ibid.*

if God, willing to shew *his* wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: 23 And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, 24 Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?” Without the greater context of Romans 9, this text could be understood in several ways. It will be helpful to first review the context beginning in Romans 9:6 where Paul began his argument. There, Paul postulated that despite national Israel’s characteristic rejection of Christ, it was not as if God’s Word to them had been ineffective. Paul then explained through the balance of the chapter how God’s Word was effective despite national Israel’s disobedience to it.

The second clause in Romans 9:6 is critical to his argument: “For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.” Just as the national Israel is not simply composed of all descendants of Jacob, the true Israel is not composed of simply all Jewish people, but all who seek righteousness by faith. Paul framed his argument around God’s sovereign dealings with national Israel—in particular the promised blessings to Abraham, the Word of God that Paul claims was effective—to make his point. Abraham had many children, but only Isaac was the child of promise, the result of God’s supernatural intervention to provide Abraham and Sarah a son, and only those through Isaac would comprise the promised physical seed of Abraham. (Romans 9:7-9). Likewise, Isaac’s wife had twins, Jacob and Esau, but only those born in the lineage of Jacob would comprise the promised seed of Abraham, national Israel. (Romans 9:10-13). God’s sovereign decision that the lineage of Jacob, and not Esau, would be the promised seed had nothing to do with their personal merit or works. (Romans 9:11). None of this has anything to do with the

election before the foundation of the world of individuals that God would justify. Instead, only the election of national Israel corporately is in view.

As Paul did throughout Romans, in diatribe form, he anticipated an objector in Romans 9:14 that might question the righteousness of God in His sovereign selection, apart from works, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob from whom national Israel would come. Paul rejected the idea that God's decisions were not just and then provided three examples of God's justice and mercy in dealing with national Israel. First, God was just in his dealings with Israel's representative, Moses, and by proxy with Israel: "For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." (Romans 9:15). The Old Testament reference is Exodus 33:19. After the golden calf incident, which surely gave God just cause to destroy them all, Moses pled for mercy on behalf of Israel twice (Exodus 32-33) and then God responded by favoring Moses with His presence in a special way. In its original context, this passage from Exodus has to do with God's mercy toward Israel and Moses with regard to the nation's sin—mercy that obviously had nothing to do with what they deserved, for "it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy"—and had nothing whatsoever to do with individual election.

Paul's second example of God's just and merciful dealings with Israel regards their exodus from Egypt. God raised up Pharaoh (put him in power) and brought Israel out from bondage. The Old Testament says Pharaoh's heart was hard (Exodus 7:13-14, 22, 8:19, 9:7), that Pharaoh hardened his heart (Exodus 8:15, 32), and God subsequently hardened Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 9:12, 10:1, 20, 11:10, 14:8). In Romans 9:17, Paul quoted from Exodus 9:16: "For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same

purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth.” In Exodus, God further said, “Still you exalt yourself against my people by not letting them go.” (Exodus 9:17). It is evident that what was in issue in Exodus was God’s sovereign decision to be merciful to Israel and bring justice to Egypt—and in so doing to demonstrate His glory—not Pharaoh’s or anyone else’s individual soteriological election. Moreover, some argue that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart by altering his capacity for obedience, but there is no support for that understanding. Surely when Pharaoh hardened his own heart he did not alter his capacity to obey, but dug his heels in and became stubborn. If anything, Pharaoh may be an example of God giving someone up in response to his initial hardness of heart, or it may be that the plagues were God’s instrument of hardening. Whatever the case, the hardness of heart is linked with the command to free Israel, not believing the gospel.

Paul’s third example drew from the imagery of God as the potter in Jeremiah 18. Paul used this particular example in response to the hypothetical objector: “Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay but, o man, who are thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, why hast thou made me thus?” (Romans 9:19-20). The objection here is not about God picking people for salvation, but making sovereign decisions regarding nations. It is also important to note that in Jeremiah 18 it was national Israel, corporately, that was the marred clay that God would reshape if they would respond obediently to His Word. (Jeremiah 18:8-11). They did resist God by not obeying His Word. The result was that God would bring the Gentiles into His redemptive plan as fellow recipients of the spiritual blessings promised to Abraham.

This brings us to the passage relied on by some to support double-predestination, Romans 9:21-24. In verse 21, Paul analogized God's sovereign decisions with regard to national Israel, which he created from Abraham, to the rights of the potter in his vocation over the clay, and argued that God was perfectly just in his dealings with national Israel because of His patience and His plan for the Gentiles: "What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction. And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?" This response both answers the charge of unrighteousness from verse 14, answers the hypothetical objector from verse 19, and transitions to Paul's point that God has acted justly and His Word has been effective because salvation was brought to the Gentiles. Some derive a double-predestination theology from this passage by taking the clay from verse 21 to be all of humanity, the vessels of wrath in verse 22 to be the reprobate, and the vessels of mercy in verse 23 to be the elect.

Some observations are in order. First, there is no indication that God did anything here before the foundation of the world, a concept necessary to support the TULIP version of unconditional election. Second, everything thus far in Paul's tightly woven argument is about national Israel and there is no textual reason to think he abruptly jumped ship to address individual election at this point. Third, since it was disobedient Israel in view in Paul's initial reference to Jeremiah 18 and God as the potter, it is better to understand that the vessels of wrath that God endured with much longsuffering to be the very same group of people, the rebellious component of national Israel, as many

Calvinists now admit.³ God endured them because He had a plan to fulfill the promise to Abraham in a new group of people--“Make known the riches of his glory...not of the Jews only but also of the Gentiles.” In this way, Paul’s potter illustration transitions from national Israel to the church. Olson’s comments are essentially correct: “The point Paul is making here is that God has the sovereign right as a potter to use Israel for two millennia and then set them aside in favor of the Church.”⁴ Paul explained in 9:30-33 that the Jews stumbled because they sought righteousness by the law, but the Gentiles attained it by faith. Paul further supported his argument with prophetic proof texts for God making the Gentiles his people also. (Romans 9:25-29). This was always God’s plan and explains the statement that the “vessels of mercy...[were] afore prepared unto glory,” a reference to God’s corporate work with a new group of people that the New Testament refers to as the church.

God always dealt with the nations, and especially national Israel, justly and with mercy, and it was always His sovereign prerogative to deal with Israel as the potter does the clay. His Word was effective despite Israel’s disobedience because Abraham’s true seed now includes believing Gentiles and because there remains a true remnant among national Israel. (Romans 9:27). Thus, the tenor of the entire chapter of Romans 9 is the effectiveness of God’s Word—in particular His promises to national Israel—and Paul proved both that God’s Word was effective and that God always acted righteously toward Israel. Individual election and salvation are foreign to the entire passage contextually,

³ Vance, Laurence M., *The Other Side Of Calvinism* (Pensacola: Vance Publications 2007), 330-31.

⁴ Olson, C. Gordon, *Getting The Gospel Right: A Balanced View Of Salvation Truth* (Cedar Knolls: Global Gospel Publishers 2005), 302.

and therefore we can find no support in Romans 9 for unconditional election or double predestination.