

Discussion: R. C. Sproul's "Chosen by God"

Let us begin with prayer.

We give You our time in this lesson, Lord. Teach us concerning Your grace. Give us grateful hearts. Renew our commitment to Your commission, we pray. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, Amen.

Let us discuss Sproul's book, *Chosen by God*. He is a fine Christian man with strong convictions. Sproul argues that the idea that God foreordains whatever comes to pass is not unique to reformed theology or even to Christianity. This idea is unique to theism. If you believe there is a god in the heavens, normally you believe that he controls what comes to pass—he foreordains it at least in some sense. Sproul also argues that God allowing sin to enter the world was a good decision, but the evil He allows is still evil. I do not think I would say it quite this way. I think Sproul is trying to get our attention by phrasing this in a controversial fashion. Certainly if God is the Lord, if He is in charge then we have to somehow understand the Fall as being within His plan. He planned or ordained to permit the Fall. That He planned or ordained it shows that it was within His control, while the allowing or permitting does not cause us to blame Him for the Fall. The fault for the Fall goes to our first parents, Genesis 3 and Romans 5 are plain on that. The fault goes especially to Adam as the head who God instituted in His dealings with the human race. But still we cannot cut the Fall loose completely from the sovereignty of God, though we may say that differently.

According to Sproul, Christianity has room for mysteries but no room for contradictions. I agree with him. I would urge us to be open to mysteries because of the Bible itself. Deuteronomy 29:29 says, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law." There are some things God has simply not revealed to us. Because of this, it should not shock us that we cannot figure everything out. It should not surprise us that God is greater than our ability to understand Him. I would emphasize, though, that there is a difference between divinely revealed mysteries and us just not wanting to understand something God has revealed to us in His Scripture. Also, accepting divine mysteries does not mean that we accept the neo-Orthodox understanding that "truth by its very nature is paradoxical." I reject that idea. But as we study the Scriptures there appear to be three great mysteries in particular. The first is how God has always existed as three in one, the mystery of the Trinity. The second one is the person of Christ, how He is both God and man as the Bible teaches. The third one is the mystery of God's sovereignty along with genuine human responsibility. With all of these we can explain parts of them, we can study them in the Scriptures, but we cannot fully understand them. Christianity has room for mysteries because the God of Christianity, of the universe, of the Bible, is an infinite, personal being. To use Francis Schaeffer's language, He is a transcendent, imminent God. And because of that, apparently the divine sovereignty and human responsibility tension is a reflection of the fact that God is infinite and personal. In that He is infinite, He is absolutely in charge. In that He is personal and He made human beings accountable to Himself, there is genuine human responsibility. Thus, the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility seem to reflect a mystery within the person of God Himself and in His dealings with the world.

Fallen man, in and of himself, does not have the moral ability to choose Christ. Anthony Hoekema, in his book, *Created in God's Image*, makes a good distinction between what he calls "freedom of choice" and true freedom. There is a difference. Freedom of choice, our ability to choose, is always a part of our makeup as human beings. We have always been able to choose, both before and after the Fall, and even in heaven we will be able to choose. But, Hoekema says, that mere freedom of choice is not real

freedom. Unsaved people who are free to choose whether to get out of bed in the morning, whether to go to school or work or the grocery—they are not compelled to do these things, and yet they are not truly free. Some of you who were saved as adults and did not grow up in a Christian home can remember being in bondage to sin. True freedom is not just the ability to choose, but it is knowing, loving, enjoying, and serving God. That has been lost in the Fall. Adam and Eve were made to be in relationship with God, and they had true freedom. They forfeited true freedom in their sin, and human nature since the Fall is bound in transgressions and sins. If left to our own desires, we would not choose God. I commend Hoekema's book to you; it is the best single volume I know of that summarizes the doctrine of human beings made in God's image and the doctrine of sin and how it has affected us. If you are thinking that true freedom really is to be able to choose opposites—to be able to choose to sin or to obey God—I urge you to think through this again. In the new heavens and the new earth, though we will be able to choose we will not be able to sin. We will only want to choose God and His will, and that will be true freedom *par excellence*. If you want to say we have to be able to choose to sin in order to be free, then you are saying we will not be free in the new heavens and the new earth, and there is something wrong with that. We will be most free then; we will be better off than Adam and Eve in the beginning! This is because we will not be able to sin as they evidently were, since they did choose sin. We have the ability to sin, but not the moral ability to choose Christ, in and of ourselves. Romans 3 says, "There is no one righteous, no not one. There is no one who seeks for God." You might say, "I sought for God!" That is true, but when we see people seeking for God we can be sure that is evidence that God has been seeking them. That is why we should get excited as we see someone take an interest in God, in spiritual things.

We are all judged guilty for Adam's sin because he, our fair and just representative, fell. This is the representative view of original sin, or the federal headship view. Adam was our representative. God set it up that way. According to Romans 5:12-19, my understanding of this is that God set it up that there would be two heads, two human beings who would be the heads of the human race. First of all Adam, in whom the whole human race fell, and second the Lord Jesus Christ through whose work we are saved. We receive the guilt of Adam and, through faith, the righteousness of Christ. There is a parallel in Romans 5:18 and 19 between Adam and Christ: "Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous."

I do not love alien guilt. The Bible teaches that Adam's guilt comes upon us all and I accept that, but I do not love it. But I do love what Martin Luther calls "alien righteousness"—the righteousness of Jesus Christ that is credited to us and saves us before a holy God. Apparently we cannot have the one without the other since God has set it up these two heads. Christianity apparently is a representative religion. We did not make it this way; God did. And He has treated us fairly and justly—in Jesus Christ He has given us even so much more than we deserve.

Most non-reformed views of predestination fail to take seriously the truth that fallen man is spiritually dead. We are not partially dead, able to see our situation and look for help, but we are completely dead and without hope apart from God coming to us and saving us. If we really consider the seriousness of sin, we will magnify the grace of God and give Him all the glory for saving us. I agree with Sproul in this argument. Ephesians 1 describes us as spiritually dead before our regeneration by God in Christ. Sproul also argues that the irresistible grace of God does not mean that people have to be pulled against their will into the kingdom of God—though that is an apt description of some people's conversions. Paul of Tarsus could be described this way, as he was persecuting Christians. But usually God gives us His grace as He sends His Holy Spirit to work in our hearts, softening us and opening our eyes so that when

we hear the Gospel it just makes so much sense. We may say, “Jesus is so precious to me now! Why was I so foolish; why did I spend all those years wasting my time? It just seems so clear to me now.” The credit for the clarity goes to the Lord who illuminated your mind and thinking. Irresistible grace does not mean that we come kicking and screaming. It means that ultimately God’s grace is invincible. He does not give up on us. He keeps sending us Christian friends and urging grandparents to pray for us. He pursues us even to our death sometimes, as some have been saved as they were dying.

Only God can call a person to salvation inwardly. We cannot force a person to be saved because we cannot create faith; we are not the Holy Spirit. That is why 1 Peter 3 commands wives of unsaved husbands to seek to win them to faith by living a holy life, not by trying to nag them into the kingdom of God. That does not work. Especially because of male pride, such nagging might only drive their husbands further from God. Only God can call a person to salvation inwardly. We can be used by God to call someone outwardly, but we cannot control what goes on inside them. That is God’s work. When God’s Word is preached, some believe and some do not. All are responsible to believe and are culpable for not believing, but God works sovereignly through His Spirit. In John 3 the Spirit is likened to the wind. This is a play on words as the Greek word for spirit is the same as for wind: “the Holy Spirit [wind] of God blows where it wills.” We cannot control the Spirit, rather we must work in harmony with Him, sharing the true Gospel, praying, and looking for God to work.

God knows from all eternity who will respond to the Gospel and who will not. This is true and there are not many who would disagree. But that is not the basis of His choosing of His people. God knows all things, all facts, and all situations. He knows the end from the beginning.

Sproul disagrees with equal ultimacy, and I agree with him. Equal ultimacy would say that God is the author of positive election in the same way that He is author of negative election or reprobation. I would say that God does stand behind the faith of both those who are saved and those who are lost, but in different ways. He is proactive in saving those who are saved in the end because if He were not they would also be lost. But as we are all running away from God and toward hell and damnation, God does not push those who are ultimately lost down that road. He decides to allow them to suffer the just penalty for their sins. Those who are saved He chooses and sends His Son to redeem them and His Holy Spirit to apply the work of the Son to their hearts. But with those who are lost, for reasons He knows and we do not, He decides to pass them by.

According to Sproul, election is unconditional while salvation is conditional on faith and repentance, which is distinct but never separate from faith. The condition for salvation is turning from sin and turning toward Christ. But election is not conditioned on anything in us as creatures. I agree with Sproul on this. Sproul also argues that it is easy to have a false sense of security about our salvation. I would rather say that it is possible to have a false sense of security. I do not agree with those churches who would tell their congregants that once they are saved, they are always saved and there is no need to make certain of their salvation. This is dangerous because someone can profess Christ as Lord and yet have no real change in his or her life and heart. Once we are truly saved Christ always keeps us, this is true. And yet the Scriptures talk about false professions of faith. Whereas we cannot lose our salvation, we can damage and even lose altogether our assurance of salvation. We persevere in the faith because God preserves us. God’s preservation is the basis of our perseverance. Sproul distinguishes between God’s sovereign, efficacious will—which always comes to pass—His perceptive will, His will in commandments—which is broken every day—and also His will in disposition. Arminians and Calvinists agree that the value of Jesus’ atonement was great enough to cover the sins of every human being. If even Adam and Eve were to be saved after they sinned, Jesus Christ would have had to die. There is no question as to the value of His saving work.