

Explaining the text of Romans 9 from a Calvinist perspective

ROMANS 9 FROM A CALVINIST PERSPECTIVE



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Important Romans 9 Introduction

Romans 9 is a text that has been the center of debate for quite some time on the subject of predestination and election. The text is seen as a revered passage of great assurance through the absolute sovereignty of God in a few ways: in the predestination of individuals via unconditional election, corporate election, conditional election, or as a text pertaining specifically to the nation of Israel.

This PDF presents a brief look at the text postulating that Romans 9 addresses not only salvation, but God's unconditional election of individuals. This text's debate will continue on for years to come, and this document should not be seen as intended to end said debate but to provide some understanding of the text from the Calvinist position in preparation for a series on CIRC comparing soteriological systems in 2023. Many great theologians and writers have spoken on this text, and should be consulted in one's study of the subject. With the intention of being brief, this PDF has sought to highlight issues more so than to exhaust them. This PDF reflects an older study of mine, which will be challenged in the upcoming series, I am sure. Regardless, I hope individuals find it helpful in some shape or form. This PDF will begin by surveying the historical context of Romans and then proceed to discuss the target text of Romans 9.

Historical Context

Romans chapter 9 falls into the longest epistle written by Paul, and this epistle is arguably the most theologically significant epistle in the New Testament.¹ It is primarily viewed as a theological treatise and a letter to the church in Rome. The authorship of Romans is rarely disputed as Paul is indicated as the author in the salutation in Romans 1:1. Further, the background of the author fits Paul's description when he calls himself a member of the tribe of Benjamin (Romans 11:1). While Paul was the author of the letter, Tertius worked as Paul's amanuensis as we read in Romans 16:22 wherein Tertius writes a greeting to the recipients of the letter. Paul was likely to have written Romans while preparing to return to Jerusalem in which Paul hoped to travel to Rome and he likely wrote Romans from Corinth. While the dating of the letter shifts based on various views of the chronology of Paul's life and ministry, the time of writing has been placed somewhere around AD 54-59 (Reumann, 2000. p. 1135) while Carson and Moo (2005) approximate AD 57 as the written date (p. 394).

Paul's letter to the Romans is addressed to "all who are in Rome" (Romans 1:7), and it is determined that despite tradition the church was established apart from Paul especially given his statements in passages such as Romans 1:10-13 and 15:22. These texts indicates that Paul had not met with the church of Rome yet. Within the context of the church of Rome it is likely that the church was heavily gentile due to Claudius's edict, which moved Jews out of Rome in AD 49 (Carson & Moo, 2005. p. 396) making the returning Jews the minority. In this, whom Paul was

¹ Hebrews is a force to be reckoned with

specifically addressing has been debated, however, it seems appropriate to say that Paul's primary audience was Gentile but that Paul did not exclude Jewish Christians. As Harvey (2017) summarizes, "it is probably best to see Romans as written to a mixed congregation of Jews and Gentiles, with Gentiles in the majority" (p. 4).

Carson & Moo (2005) point to the theological nature of Romans by pointing out that Romans can be seen as a "tractate letter, one that has as its main component a theological argument or series of arguments" (p. 402). In various instances within Romans, rhetorical questions and argumentations are raised by Paul in anticipation and readily addressed. In various passages, a single theme or purpose in Romans is difficult to point to, but many have moved to simply state that the key concept is "the gospel or the gospel of the righteousness of God" (Quarles, 2003. p. 14690). It has been noted that Paul's letter to the Romans is a theological treatise that discusses the gospel, "particularly as it related to the salvation historical question of Jew and Gentile, law and gospel, continuity and discontinuity between the old and the new" (Carson & Moo, 2005. p. 407).

In light of such information we can navigate our way to the context of chapter 9 of Paul's theological treatise on the Gospel. Within chapter one we are quickly moved from the salutation to the sinfulness of humanity (1:18-3:20) in which Paul transitions to how individuals are justified before God in chapter three. Chapter three consists of the justification of sinners through the work of Christ, and faith being the means by which justification is obtained (3:21-5:11). Chapter five walks us through the imputation of Christ's righteousness in contrast to Adam who imputed sin upon humanity (5:12-21) while chapter six focuses upon the believer's new relationship to sin and his being united with Christ. In chapter seven Paul makes a case for the

morality of the law yet the laws failure in bringing about salvation before going into chapter eight. In chapter eight Paul makes argument that the righteous living of believers is through the power of the Spirit over and against their flesh (8:1-17), which failed (cf. chapter 7). In 8:18-39 Paul gives believers the basis for their hope despite suffering and their hope in trials and afflictions.

Context prior to chapter 9

Prior to examining chapter nine we are forced to consider the context leading up to Paul's discussion of Israel. How Romans 8:28-29 is viewed is critical for understanding predestination and election in Romans 9 because of its implications. In verse 28 we read that the ultimate good will be accomplished for those who love God, "for those who are called according to his purpose" (ESV). It is in verse 29 where dispute arises as the text states that those whom God "foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." One view presents foreknowledge as conditional in which it is essentially a type of knowledge that God has by foreseeing the choices of individuals. This view implies that God predestines those whom he sees will accept him in the future. It is argued that this is faulty as the context of the passage puts the emphasis wholly on the works of God, that is, the entire passage focuses on what God has done and is doing. In other words, the passage puts nothing in the hands of human beings here.

Additionally, the meaning of προέγνω (proegno) is a choosing beforehand, and is not a passive acquisition of knowledge (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, & Gingrich, 2000. p. 866).

Verse 28 stresses that it is God's plan and purpose that all things work together, and within the context of "foreknowledge" we can see this idea unfolding. Every verb in Romans 8:28-29 shows how God works things in accordance with "his" will (v. 27). It has been noted by many that the background of foreknowledge (προγινώσκω, proginosko) is found within the Old Testament, "where the idea (yada) describes God's special knowledge of a person rather than a prior knowledge of how a person will respond to God" (Harvey, 2017. p. 210). When speaking on conditional verses unconditional election Herrick (2004) simply summarizes, "But here again terms such as yada' in Hebrew and proginosko in Greek do not indicate neutrality, but a positive relationship to the thing known" (p. 13).

This reality can be seen in Romans 11:1-2 when the text speaks to "spiritual Israel" and in 1 Peter 1:18-20 in which Christ is described as foreknown. The usage in the Old Testament is particularly significant, which we can see in Genesis 4:1. In this text, the term (yada) is utilized in that Adam "knew" his wife, showing the intimate knowledge that is not mere intellectual awareness. It is also used in texts such as Jeremiah 1:4-5 when we recount "Before I formed you in the womb I *knew* you" (my emphasis). In fact, the terminology of foreordination is arguably more appropriate within the context of Romans 8-9 in that God's choices are prior to the foundation of the world. Further, the terminology of "also" and "predestined" places emphasis upon the reality that the "preordained plan of God will certainly come to pass in accordance with his will" (Harvey, 2017. p. 210).

If foreknowledge is a type of looking through the corridors of time to see who would have faith, Romans 8:28-29 breaks down. To elaborate: if predestination is dependent upon foreknowledge of foreseen faith, and such a faith can be lost, then nothing is actually predestined. Just as well, if that faith can be lost, and is lost, then nothing was actually foreseen nor actually predestined. If the faith cannot be lost then the defense of libertarian free will holding up this peculiar notion of foreseen faith is canceled out or pointless.

Further, if the “calling” mentioned in the text is qualified by those who are predestined, but predestination is conditional upon foreseen faith, then the calling must follow foreseen faith in which both predestination and calling are senseless. If one maintains that justification is by faith and conditional upon calling and predestination, which is qualified by foreseen knowledge of faith, then justification ultimately is not by faith, but rather perseverance in the faith. Justification then becomes acquired by faith plus works if predestination, calling, and foreknowledge are ultimately determined by perseverance in one’s faith. Lastly, if glorification is conditional upon all these prerequisites then glorification is no longer an assuring guarantee as Paul makes it to be, but rather a conditional clause that may be obtained so long as one’s faith preserves. This is to say that the weight of Paul’s assuring promise loses its thrust and all of the attention is shifted to what man is doing rather than God. Thus, it is my contention that this view isn’t the most accurate, especially given the clear emphasis on the work God is doing, which acts as a means of assurance.

With this in mind it is observed that in verse 29 the ultimate good that God is accomplishing is conformity to his Son’s image, and those individuals who are predestined will be like Christ. Verse 30 gives the process of God’s actions to save a particular people, “And those

whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” Paul moves on to discuss the great assurance believers have because of God’s purpose and actions (Romans 8:31-36) in bringing those whom he predestined to glorification, and the guarantee that all who are justified will be glorified. Paul says it was in God’s sovereign love that we are more than conquerors and nothing can separate us from the love of God because of who our savior is (Romans 8:37-39). God’s purpose in election cannot be thwarted, and in that we can have hope.

This context leading up to Romans 9 cannot be ignored in one’s examination of the debate. Nor can the context be missed lest we lose what Paul is speaking about, especially because chapter 9 begins asyndetically. David Wallace (2012) notes that following the hymn of assurance, Romans 9 begins in a way that answers the question of, “how can we trust that nothing will separate us from Christ if the promise to Israel wasn’t fulfilled?” (p. 4). Wallace (2012) notes, “The asyndeton that starts off the next section thus has a powerful rhetorical, though subtle, effect. Keeping this assurance to each individual believer is crucial if one is to grasp the full import of Romans 9” (p. 4).

Romans 9:1-5

Paul in the opening of chapter nine expresses his anguish for his people in verse 1-3 as it relates directly to the salvation of the Jews who have rejected Christ. Paul's statements about being accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of his kinsmen (v. 3), contextually is not speaking about national blessings or privilege, but rather belief in Jesus Christ. After speaking about the reality that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ (8:37-39) Paul turns around and says, "I could wish that I were accursed – cut off from Christ – for the sake of my people" (v. 3, NET). Paul in verses 4-5 explains why the Jews would seem to be the ones who would receive the Christ. It is expected that they would receive the Messiah because of God's choosing of national Israel and the blessings that accompanied being God's people. Paul's entire anguish is over the *lack of salvation of his kinsmen* and will have a section in Romans (chap. 9-11) to discuss God's faithfulness to Israel despite the failure of many to believe in the Messiah. Paul argues that to Israel belongs all these things of God, including the Messiah, because they are the ones through whom the messiah was promised (v. 5). Despite this, Paul speaks to the fact that his people rejected the messiah, and moves onto his first argument.

Romans 9:6-13

Paul has just expressed that the people who the Messiah belonged to rejected the Messiah when they were God's chosen people, but the question is why? At this point God's promises could be perceived to have failed in that Israel failed to come to Christ, but Paul begins by countering this in verse 6. Paul first tells us that the word of God has not failed (v. 6) and begins explaining why we can believe that, "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel" (ESV). The argument is laid out that the word of God has not failed, because not all of physical Israel is true Israel. For the Jews this would have been shocking in that Jews assumed national corporate election, "They thought of themselves as the elect of God and all others as the non-elect. They thought all Jews were going to heaven and all Gentiles to hell" (Deffinbaugh, 2004. p. 13). The reality is that election is only corporate in the sense that God elects individuals into a body. Paul will, contrary to the Jew's expectations, demonstrate that this is how God has always operated by providing several examples of election. Paul mentions Israel, but emphatically goes against their ideas of corporate election in that the nation of Israel was not elected for the promise of salvation, but rather *a remnant within Israel was elected* to be heirs of the promises. It was God who determined who would be a child of promise and limits his promise to children whom he elects.

Paul further elaborates on his statements that true Israel is actually a remnant within physical Israel, "not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but 'Through

Isaac shall your offspring be named. This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promises are counted as offspring” (v. 8).

Paul’s argument is simple: God’s promise has not failed, because the charge of failure is built on the false premise that merely being a physical descendent makes you an heir of the promise. It needs to be noted that verse 8 is critical as it is the focal point of verses 6-13 through Paul’s use of a chiasm or chiasmus.

Beginning in verse 6 we read the first distinction between the children of the flesh versus the children of the promise, “For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel.” Verse 7 moves to Isaac, “nor are they all children because they are Abraham’s descendants, but ‘through Isaac your descendants will be named,” which stresses the same distinction between the children of flesh and those of the promise. The center point of the chiasm is found in verse 8 which reads, “it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise who are regarded as descendants.” Verse 9 mirrors verse 7 by addressing Isaac again and verses 10-13 mirror verse 6 by circling back to Jacob. The distinction is made between those who are children of the promise in accordance with God’s “purpose of election.” This is significant because of the stress put on the phrases the “children of God” and “children of the promise.” Paul’s usage of these phrases in verse 8, “children of God” and “children of the promise,” elsewhere refers to those who are saved, which can be seen in Romans 8:16 and verse 21, as well as in Philippians 2:15 and Galatians 4:28.

Going back to Paul’s examples of election, Paul uses firstly the example of Isaac. Isaac would be the child of promise, not Ishmael, and the promise did not fail, because only Isaac was the child of promise (v. 9). In Romans 9:10-13 we see another example of God’s election in

Jacob and Esau, which solidifies God's absolute freedom in election. They came from the same mother, by the same father, and yet, before they were born, with no account of what they would do, God chose Jacob "in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls" (v. 11). It is the one who calls, not the one who works, that determines election. In other sections of Paul we see the usage of "works" referring to works unto salvation. In Romans 3:20-28 and 4:2-6 for example, Paul makes it clear that salvation is not by works, and this terminology coupled with verses 9:1-5 solidifies the salvific nature of Romans 9. Furthermore, the reality is that "call" in the Pauline corpus is most often a call to salvation, such as in 2 Timothy 1:9. The structure of verse 11 makes it clear that "God's act of selection is independent of all human effort" (Harvey, 2017. p. 231). This demonstrates the individualistic unconditional election, which results in a corporate body, contrary to the notion that the corporate body is determined by the actions of the individuals.

An objection is often raised that Paul is speaking about nations given Paul's quotation of Genesis 25:23, yet Paul's quotation actually stresses Paul's words in verse 6b, "Not all who descended from Israel belong to Israel." Paul, rather than quoting Genesis 25 when it does speak directly about "nations," focuses in on the individuals of Jacob and Esau thus carrying along his theme of a remnant. Furthermore, Paul's stress point in verse 8, regarding the children of the promise, as well as his salvific terminology (call and works), points to individuals who are unconditionally elected.

Paul answers the question of "why has Israel rejected the Messiah" by answering that not all physical Israel is true Israel and expands by stating that they have rejected the Messiah, because they were not those who were children of promise. The distinction between the spiritual

Israel and physical Israel becomes clear, and how spiritual Israel is determined is through the unconditional election of God. What Paul lays out with Esau and Jacob, which defied expectations of the Jews (as the eldest was not the inheritor of the promise), coupled with the overarching context laid out in chapter 8, we see the clear understanding of chapter 9 emerging.

Romans 9:14-18

Here Paul begins by raising another counter-argument, this time regarding the injustice of God that could be perceived on account of his election (v. 14). Paul counters this argument of injustice by pointing to the absolute freedom of God to have mercy on whom he desires (v. 15). In this we see the usage of the terms “mercy” and “compassion” which are verbs of God’s action of choosing whom he will act upon. “Whom” here is singular indicating that there are individuals in mind who will be literally “mercied” or “compassioned.” Verse 16 re-stresses God’s absolute sovereignty and unconditional election of individuals, “So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.” Why is God’s election fair? Because he is absolutely free in all of his actions to do as he pleases according to his purposes and neither man’s will (repentance and faith are an act of will) or exertion plays a role.

Paul demonstrates God’s mercy upon individuals and moves the point further by moving to God’s sovereignty in Egypt. Paul points to the reality that it was God’s intention to judge Egypt and bring glory to himself through the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart (v. 17). Paul then

stresses, “So then he has mercy on whomever he wills and he hardens whomever he wills” (v. 18) before raising the last anticipated objection. Verse 18 here also utilizes the singular, bringing to the forefront individuals yet again, as the individual of Pharaoh is presented as an example.

Paul’s last anticipated objection is whether or not man can be held responsible for his response to God, “for who can resist his will” (v. 19). Paul raises the simple point that the created creature is in no position to question how the sovereign potter molds his clay (v. 20) while yet again using the singular verbiage. Verse 21 stresses that the potter has right over his creatures, to purpose them, for either honorable or dishonorable use. The theme of God’s absolute sovereignty continues and as we continue through the text we read,

“What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory” (v. 22-23).

Paul’s discussion of God’s sovereign and free election to salvation has moved to showing that there is no charge against God, for he has the complete freedom to do that which he pleases. In 9:22-23 we see that some vessels receive mercy while others are purposed for destruction. It needs to be raised yet again, that the singular is utilized when speaking of a vessel being molded for honor while another is molded for dishonor in verse 21. Noteworthy is the usage of “vessel” which is always used for individuals, which we can see in 1 Thessalonians 4:4, 2 Timothy 2:21, and 1 Peter 3:7.

While many questions can arise from this passage, there is no question that Paul's continued terminology and subject matter deals with salvation. In verse 22-23 we see firstly the term "destruction" which refers to "annihilation or ruin" while it also refers to final destruction in various other passages (Harvery, 2017. p. 240). Such a destruction cannot be mistaken as anything other than judgement especially in light of Paul's example of Pharaoh. Additionally, Paul reaffirms the vessels of mercy will be glorified, "prepared beforehand for glory," as he mentioned in the "golden chain" of Romans 8:28-30. Paul moves into the extension of election to the Gentiles in verse 24 in which Paul states, "even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles."

God's Sovereign Election

Paul begins the chapter of Romans 9 by answering the question that was likely in the minds of his audience, why has God's people rejected their messiah? Paul's answer is that God's word has not failed, but that there is a distinction between physical Israel and spiritual Israel. Moving from there, Paul points to the simple fact that God has not given the promise to all of physical Israel, but only the children of promise receive the promises of God. Paul demonstrates that God, through his purpose of election, selected individuals to be the children of promise. Paul then explains that there is no injustice on God's part because God is free to do as he pleases in showing mercy to whom he desires and in hardening those whom he desires. From here Paul

addresses further “unfairness” by pointing back to God’s sovereignty over the creature who are described as mere clay in the hands of the potter. All of the discussion ties back to the primary issue of why Paul’s kinsmen were not saved, while Paul defended the reality that the word of God did not fail (v. 6).

The implications of Romans 9 in the life of a believer are straight forward and firstly summarized in a simple term: assurance. If the Jewish-Christians had reasons to doubt God’s promises because many of their kinsmen rejected the Messiah, then how could any Gentile have assurance of the promises Paul mentioned in 8:28-38? In Paul’s explanation of why his kinsmen rejected the promise of salvation through Jesus Christ, we learn that God’s promises had never failed, but rather that individuals had misunderstood them or taken them for granted. Paul actually carries Romans 9 through chapter 11 to further show God’s faithfulness to those who are children of the promise, but it is ultimately the unconditional sovereign election of God that we can have assurance of salvation. If our selection was based on “work” rather than “call” then we would never be able to have true assurance of salvation. It is on basis of the pure – free – mercy of God that we can trust that we who have been called will be glorified.

Romans 9 also solidifies the reality that God is indeed sovereign over all and Paul provides a response to those who raise the objections. To those who say God is unjust for not saving everyone, Paul responds with the reality that God is free to give mercy to whom he desires. Mercy cannot be demanded. To those who raise the objection of; how does God still find fault? Paul reminds us that we are merely clay in the hands of the potter and as such we are in no position to “talk back” to God. God operates in his completely free sovereign will for his own purposes to the praise of his glory.

In examination of Romans 9, there can be a solid case made that this text speaks on the salvation of individuals to some extent or another. The soteriology and God's election of individuals in Romans 9 is difficult to dispute, which is why, I believe, many classical Arminians have affirmed such but within the framework of conditional election. Indeed, Romans 9 includes a corporate body (corporate election), which is logically made up of individuals. There are many questions that further come from Romans 9 including how Paul utilized the Wisdom of Ben Sira in his argumentation to appeal to his audience or whether or not Paul is merely being emphatic on the mercy shown to Gentiles despite Jewish expectations. Hopefully, however, this PDF will give you a starting point in understanding the Calvinist's perspective of the text.

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