

Hyper-Calvinism

The dangers of theological disproportionism

You won't find the word "disproportionism" in any dictionary worth its salt, so feel free to stop the googling. I admit that this is not the queen's English, but in a world where "isms" abound it is important for us to know about the dangers of them all, whether "relativism," "anti-supernaturalism," "post-modernism," or whatever other dubious "isms" may exist that are worthy of refutation.

Such is the case with the topic I'd like to address in this article. For some reading this, the term "Hyper-Calvinism" might not yet have entered their sphere of cognizance, however there are subtle ways in which they might already have been influenced by it. In broad strokes, Hyper-Calvinism is a misrepresentation of "good" Calvinistic teachings or tenets, the majority of which I personally can vouch for. Within a Calvinistic framework, these teachings, although biblical, get inflated, magnified, or for the lack of a better word, get "pumped-up" to the point of being disproportionate, leading to what I like to call "*theological disproportionism*."

Now it should be said that to be disproportionate is almost never a good thing, unless of course you are an Olympic swimmer who for obvious reasons could use the advantage of a pair of size 18 feet (UK). But in theology, this is never good. Take body builders as an example. Many young men have been lulled into believing that it is acceptable to use performance enhancing drugs in order to achieve one's training goals. This often leads to a disproportionate physic, some even finding it difficult to brush their own teeth because their arm muscles have gotten so big. This is what can be seen on the outside. Internally however, their livers start to take a knock as it cannot effectively deal with the bombardment of all the different substances.

This is what happens when we are theologically disproportionate, in a spiritual sense, of course. When it comes to Calvinism, I am convinced that it is its desire to understand everything about God in a logical way which makes it particularly susceptible to exaggeration or inflation. What is indeed a noble trait of Calvinistic doctrine, in other words, that it fundamentally approaches biblical data in a logical way, can easily turn into a "hyped-up" version of the same set of beliefs, leading to Hyper-Calvinism. Here's what I mean by this. Without mentioning the name of Calvin, I am convinced that one can make a strong biblical case for *monergism*, or the fact that God saves us without our assistance. Just think about how Paul explained it to the church on the isle of Crete: "*he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour...*" (Titus 3:5-6). This is one example among many that prove the same about our salvation. However, logic fails us when we try to reconcile this with the Bible passages that teach faith and repentance as the *requirements* for salvation, which the Bible does equally well (Matt. 4:17, Lk. 15:7, Acts 3:19, 16:31). Just speaking of repentance, the Bible views it as something that God commands/requires from sinners (Acts 3:19), but that it is also something that he alone can give (2 Tim. 2:25).

We get trapped in the burden of logic when we get uncomfortable with these ostensible inconsistencies in Scripture. And by "uncomfortable" I mean thinking that we have to have an answer for it. Of course we should strive to be logical, but pure logic is evasive in many of the doctrines we hold dear to, predestination, substitutionary atonement, and the rest. There is a great deal that we can know for certain,

but when placed side-by-side, some of these doctrines seem to contradict one another when they should rather be understood as complimentary truths.

The main aim of my writing is to encourage us to be okay with this tension in our theology and not to always worry about seeking logical ways of explaining them. If not, we might be tempted to stretch logic too far and say things about the Bible which God simply *has not* said in the Bible. Let's approach this by looking at two of the main areas in which one may fall trap to Hyper-Calvinism.

1. God only loves the Elect meaningfully

Some Hyper-Calvinists, or as R.C. Sproul refers to them, those who hold to "sub-Calvinism" or "anti-Calvinism" would say that God only loves the elect meaningfully because they are the only people who are saved, thus actually loved by him. I am not saying this is true of every Calvinist, but it could be that taking the view that Jesus died only for the elect could falsely lead to this assumption. If Jesus only died for the elect then any love coming from God could be said to be really reserved only for the elect. But regardless of any particular view of the extent of the atonement, I am convinced that the case can solidly be made that God does have a high level of love for all people, not just the elect who are obviously specially loved by him. A few Bible passages should prove this point.

Common Grace

Common grace is at least one expression of an indiscriminate love that God has for all human beings. Common grace means that God is gracious to the reprobate in ways similar to the elect as it involves basic things such as food, clothing, air to breathe etc. Now some Hyper-Calvinists might be quick to say that it is purely because of the presence of the elect everywhere on planet Earth that God allows the natural processes of rain and harvest, for instance, to proceed. However, I think it is more than just because the elect are present. Take for instance how the Lord Jesus explained why the Israelites did not have any reason to hate their enemies. In one way they were tempted to think so because they were of course God's elect nation in a general sense. Yet Jesus rebuked them for this saying: ⁴³ *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.'"* ⁴⁴ *But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,* ⁴⁵ *so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust"* (Matt. 5:45).

What the Lord said here in the Sermon on the Mount fits nicely with Psalm 145:9 which states that ⁴⁹ *"The Lord is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made."* Therefore we must be willing to say that there is indeed a general, if not caring sense in which God has provided for the unbeliever as well. They thrive in a sense and have food, clothing, homes just as unbelievers. Sure, we understand that the unbeliever sadly places his trust in these things which is something that the believer does not do. But again, in a general sense, it seems that God's love can be seen at work in all.

In addition to basic human needs, common grace also leads us to believe that God cares about the fallen estate of the unsaved. We see evidence of this in direct statements such as made in 2 Peter 3:9 which says that ⁴⁹ *"The Lord is not slow to fulfil his promise as some count slowness,"* speaking of his judgment that will for sure come upon the unrepentant, *"but is patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."*

It is verses such as these that make it difficult to think that God had actively, somewhere in eternity past, predestined people hell. This leads us to a second major difficulty within Hyper-Calvinism.

2. God actively predestines people to hell

Hyper-Calvinists believe that God actively predestines people to hell. Again, this is a logical extension of the doctrine of predestination of the elect. We don't have (or shouldn't have) any problem with the doctrine of predestination, just go read Ephesians 1:3-6:

“³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.”

This passage undoubtedly proves that God specifically ordained the coming in of the elect and that they would finally make it to heaven’s glory one day. However, just because this is true it doesn’t mean that the opposite is necessarily true as well. If we say this then we are committing an error called the “*negative inference fallacy*.” It is a philosophical term which means that if a proposition is true, it does not necessarily follow that a negative inference drawn from that proposition is likewise true. For instance, I can say that if I am a resident of the Western Cape, then I am a resident of the RSA. But I cannot say that if I am not a resident of the Western Cape, then I am not a resident of the RSA. The same logic follows for predestination. In the pursuit of logical solutions for predestination some miss the basic logic that God might not intend for the negative side of predestination to be inferred onto the non-elect.

Thus, to speak of the non-elect is not necessarily the same as speaking of people actively predestined by God for damnation. The two are not the same. In effort to answer the question of “double-predestination” (that God predestines both ways, to heaven and hell) the 19th century English clergyman, Charles Simeon, said the following:

“If, as the Apostle says, ‘there is a remnant according to the election of grace,’ we are ready to suppose that those who are not of that number are not accountable for their sins, and that their final ruin is to be imputed rather to God’s decrees than to their own fault. But this is a perversion of the doctrine. It is a consequence which our proud reason is prone to draw from the decrees of God: but it is a consequence which the inspired volume totally disavows. There is not in the whole sacred writings one single word that fairly admits of such a construction. The glory of man’s salvation is invariably ascribed to the free, the sovereign, the efficacious grace of God: *but the condemnation of men is invariably charged upon their own willful sins and obstinate impenitence*. If, because we know not how to reconcile these things, men will controvert and deny them, we shall content ourselves with the answer which St. Paul himself made to all such cavilers and objectors; ‘Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?’ And if neither the truth nor the authority of God will awe them into submission, we can only say with the fore-mentioned apostle, ‘If any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant.’ As for those, if such are to be found, who acknowledge the sovereignty of God, and take occasion from it to live in sin, we would warn them with all possible earnestness to cease from their fatal delusions. In comparison of such characters, the people who deny the sovereignty of God are innocent. We believe there are many persons in other respects excellent, who, from not being able to separate the idea of absolute reprobation from the doctrine of unconditional election, are led to reject both together: but what excellence can he have, who ‘turns the very grace of God into licentiousness,’ and ‘continues in sin that grace may abound?’ A man that can justify such a procedure, is beyond the reach of argument: we must leave him, as St. Paul does, with that awful warning, ‘His damnation is just.’”

Simeon obviously takes quite an aggressive stance against the doctrine of double-predestination, making the repeated point that reprobate men will be culpable before God one day, not because predestined them to damnation, but rather because they did not repent. Again, 2 Peter 3:9 quoted above makes this perfectly clear.

But it is really the compassion that God has for every human being, even the worst of examples, that should drive us to believe that he doesn’t actively predestine them to reprobation. One text that illustrates this is 1 Timothy 2:4. In this passage Paul commands the Ephesian church to pray for all people and the governing reason for this is found in verse four which says that “³ [t]his is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour, ⁴ who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Sure, some might say that this is a general statement pointing to the fact that God intends for both Jew and Gentile to be saved, but it is difficult to move away from the general drive of the phrase which seems to universally encompass all of mankind and God’s general desire for man. In other words, as R. Kent Hughes says: “What we have here is an expression of the divine desire that brought about the Incarnation and Chris’s death on the cross...”

To this same verse, Philip Towner comments: "...the verb 'to will' should be understood in the strongest sense as indicating God's will. In this statement of God's purpose for humankind, however, the element of human response to the gospel is not minimized within the process. It is God's *universal intention*, as opposed to some form of exclusivism, that is mainly in mind." This is why Paul encourages the Ephesians to pray for all people. It is God's universal intention for all to be saved, even though we know that all will not be saved in the end because the benefit of the cross is only received through faith and repentance. At least according to this passage it becomes difficult to reconcile God's desire for all to be saved with what Hyper-Calvinists would call God's decree according to which he predestines all people other than the elect to eternal damnation.

Even Romans 9:20-21 is not saying that which some double-predestinationists would like it to say. As Bruce Demarest points out "They state that the saved were 'prepared...in advance for glory,' whereas the lost are 'prepared for destruction.'" Demarest goes on to explain that since Paul does not use the same verb for "prepared" that he uses in 2 Cor. 9:5 "...suggests that it is not God who reprobated in eternity; rather, sinners prepare themselves for destruction by their own refusal to repent." In other words, Demarest believes that God did not predestine any sinners unto reprobation. Thus, as it involves Romans 9:20-21, although God actively prepares the destiny of the elect (for honorable use), we get the impression that God is passive in the preparation of the non-elect (for dishonorable use). They do it to themselves according to this passage.

Still, some would look at God's dealing with Pharaoh in the Old Testament and say that this is testimony of God's active predestining for wrath (Ex. 4:21; 7:3; 9:12). However, Demarest reminds that "prior to mentioning the divine hardening, Scripture indicates that Pharaoh freely opposed God's purposes (Exude. 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 34, 35; *et al.*; cf. 13:15; 1 Sam 6:6)." He goes on to say that "[t]he Bible does not explain the nature of the hardening, but it appears that God's role was that of confirming Pharaoh's decisions rather than predetermining them." Demarest concludes by explaining that by withdrawing his Spirit and by allowing Pharaoh to act on his own desires, God let him realize his sinful passions. The hardening is thus presented as a "judgment for rejecting God's good purposes."

Conclusion

Scripture is clear on God's specific, electing love for his bride, the church. This love is what actively draws sinners to Christ who otherwise would not come to him if not for this active drawing (Jn. 6:44). It is tempting, but we assume much if we negatively infer the same truth about God's love for his elect on his dealing with the reprobate. To say that God actively elected his children does not automatically allow us to say that God actively elected all the rest for damnation. This is neither biblically sound nor theologically helpful since it creates the impression that it is a fatalistic world that we live in.

It is better to say that people will be damned in judgment one day because of their rebellion (Ps. 9:17; Lk. 13:1-5). The fact that people will end up in hell one day is the consequence of their unwillingness to repent from sin and believe in the Lord Jesus.

Let's steer clear of "theological disproportionism."