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Arminianism and Adventism: The Heart of Him Who Hardens Hearts

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October 15, 2010

Arminianism and Adventism: The Heart of Him Who Hardens Hearts

Skip MacCarty, Pastor for Evangelism at Pioneer Memorial Church in Berrien Springs, Michigan chose [Rom 9:6-24](#) as key text for his presentation during the first of the Symposium's breakout sessions.

Entering into the controversial topic of the correct interpretation of this much discussed passage, he pointed to the personal challenges he and many others have with making sense of the above passage.

After reading the text together, MacCarty pointed to the fact that this passage was crucial and of essential importance to [John Calvin](#) and fundamental for his entire theological reasoning. In contrast, Jesus Christ summarized his theology in [Matt 7:9-12](#): God's goodness exceeds the goodness of humans, which, in all their evil ways, still retained some goodness from the divine image God has put in them. Rom 9 is actually, so MacCarty, a picture which has [Matt 7:9-12](#) in mind. Then the presenter broke the debate and the passage in Rom 9:6-24 down into five fundamental questions:

1. What right do we sinful mortals have to question the perfect, all-wise, sovereign God? [Rom 9:20](#)

The question Paul poses seems to indicate, so MacCarty, that man has no right to question God's behavior. But the pattern, God set up in Scripture, reveals the attitude of Him to enter into conversation with man—God received the partially hard and desperate questions of Adam, Abraham, Moses, Job, the Psalmists and many others. God invites His children to open, honest relationship in which they are granted the freedom to pose questions to God because they are friends of him.

2. In what sense does God love some and hate others before they are even born? [Rom 9:10-13](#)

Referring to [Exod 20:12](#), [Eph 5:25](#), [Luke 14:26,33](#) in contrast to [Matt 6:24](#), MacCarty pointed to the contrast of the commands to love, but also to hate. By "hating" here God says that in instances, where we have to choose between family and Him, we should choose Him. An important help to interpret these texts are Jesus' words in [Matt 10:37](#). Also the careful contemplation of the context in which the words "Jacob have I loved, but esau have I hated" ([Rom 9:13](#)) appear, helps to realize that [John 3:16](#), the offer of salvation, still applied to Esau.

3. In what sense does God harden some people's hearts against Him? [Rom 9:14-18](#)

[1 Tim 2:3-4](#) expresses the will of God for the salvation of all. Going back to verse 1 of the same chapter makes it clear that the context means "all men". Reading [Rom 11:32](#) we might ask: What does it mean that

"God hath concluded them all in unbelief"? MacCarty suggested that this means the fallen state, the sinful nature that has come to all human beings. But God's intent, promise, mission and purpose is mercy, which he wants to show to everyone with the desire to convince them of His goodness and love.

In what sense, then, does the OT speak of God hardening Pharaoh's heart?

Biblical passages like Exodus 4:21 and seven additional texts in Exodus seem puzzling. In order to interpret this passage correctly MacCarty points to a key concept in Scripture, i.e. that God does not prevent things he could prevent while in doing so he desires to fulfill a certain purpose which resonates with His overall will. The careful reading of [Rom 9:18](#) leads us to the question: How can we determine from the Bible who God wants to have mercy on and who He wants to harden? The following key texts should be considered in this regard, because they give essential information about God's will: [Rom 11:32](#); [1 Tim 2:3-4](#); [4:9-10](#); [1 John 2:2; 4:14](#); [2 Pet 3:9](#).

MacCarty further pointed out that it especially helps to be aware that Paul had Isa 63-65 in mind when writing Romans 9. In these three chapters of Isaiah God is dialoguing with Israel, beseeching them through the prophet to turn from their evil ways and give Him a chance to rescue them. The basic assumption of texts like these in Scripture is that man himself binds God's hands by not responding to His warnings and appeals. Thus we become victims of the natural consequences of the sinful choices we have taken. God himself, in Isa 63-65, rejects the literal application of the potter/clay-picture and thus refuses the faulty interpretation often given of Rom 9, which is that God would purposefully exclude certain people from answering positively to His appeals. Here MacCarty pointed to God's wrath in [Rom 1:18-32](#), which functions accordingly.

Now Israel, in response, acted defensively. Actually they blamed God not only for the suffering they went through, but also for the sinful decisions they had made and the resistance to His will: "Why, O LORD, *do you make us wander from your ways* and harden our hearts, so we do not revere you?" (Isa 63:17; *italics added*). In a nutshell, they reproached God for doing what many interpreters of Rom 9 accuse Him of doing, i.e. hardening man's heart against Him.

The immediate response of God consists of the famous words often cited in contexts of God's passionate man-searching love: "I am sought of them that asked not for me; I am found of them that sought me not: I said, Behold, behold me, unto a nation that was not called by my name. I have spread out my hands all the day unto a rebellious people, which walketh in a way that was not good, after their own thoughts" ([Isa 65:1-2](#)). God thus stressed the fact, that in no way he is the one who hardens anyone's heart. This dialogue, according to MacCarty, proves what Paul wanted to say by the potter/clay analogy in Rom 9. God's reaction (Isa 65) to Israel's accuses is quoted by Paul in [Rom 10:20-21](#). God's only part in hardening their hearts consisted in the loving appeals to them, in His saving warnings, in His continual offering of full and free salvation. Besides that, he gave them full freedom to respond to His calling as they liked. They could have replied with repentance and obedience, with a full turn back to Him. But instead they chose to willfully harden their hearts and reject His salvation.

Paul referenced in Rom 9 to the essence of Isa 63-65 in order to point back to God's appeal to Israel's hearts and to call them into His presence.

4. In what sense does God (the potter) make some people (lumps of clay) for a "noble purpose" and others for "common use"? [Romans 9:18-21](#)

Skip MacCarty gave key texts which help to discern the meaning of this passage: [Jer 18:1-11](#); [Isa 65:1-2](#); [63:16-17](#); [64:8](#); [65:1-2.12](#).

A classic passage employing the picture of potter and clay is found in [Jer 18:1-11](#) and shows, that the potter is

very responsive to the reaction of the clay.

Also [2 Tim 2:20](#) and [1 Cor 12:22-25](#) shed light on this passage, in pointing to the fact that here we are not dealing with a salvation calling, but with a call to service, a call for working for God.

5. How does God show His wrath? [Rom 9:22,23](#)

Wondering about God's wrath, according to MacCarty, we are led back to consider His patience towards those who willfully harden their hearts against His loving appeals to save them. According to [Rom 11:32](#) everybody is an object of God's mercy. Remaining "objects of his wrath" is not possible until or unless *we* ourselves reject His salvific efforts, see [Exod 34:6-7](#) and [Rom 2:4-5](#).

MacCarty suggested that God actually demonstrated His power and love, for example to Egypt and the Pharaoh, in order to impress their hearts and minds and soften their hearts, so that they might see who the true God is.

Concluding, Pastor MacCarty emphasized the theological as well as pastoral importance and implications of a correct understanding of the passages under consideration.

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