

STUDIES IN ESCHATOLOGY No. 14

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“Paucitas Salvandorum?”

I said last week that I had concluded our consideration of the Bible’s teaching about the Second Coming, or, more precisely, our consideration of where and how the Second Coming fit into the consummation of history and the end of the age. Each of the three great schools of interpretation (a-, pre-, and postmillennialism) answer that question in a different way, however much they may agree about most things. We looked at the three great New Testament texts that bear on that question, the three texts, the interpretation of which, largely determines one’s eschatological outlook: Romans 11, Matthew 24, and Revelation 20. However, before we move on to consider our remaining topics in this series – the last judgment, hell, and heaven – I want to devote a Sunday evening to the consideration of a vexing question related to this large question of Christ’s second coming and the end of the age. It does not concern the scenario of the consummation – we have said enough about that – but, rather, what that consummation will mean for mankind as a whole. I am speaking of the question of the number of those who will be saved at the last. Will the end of all things leave most of mankind unsaved, lost and subject to judgment, or will most human beings be saved and bound for glory?

It is a question that bears mightily on our own perception of our faith and of the world around us and certainly bears mightily on the perception of Christianity and the gospel entertained by others. It is one thing to believe in salvation by grace, salvation as a gift of God, salvation as the achievement of God’s mighty and very particular love for individual human beings. In some ways that is difficult enough. The very idea that God should love some human beings in this way and not others has proved a scandal to many, including a great many Christians through the ages who have tried with might and main to fashion a view of Christianity that removes that scandal. But, it is another thing to believe in salvation by grace if only a small portion of the total number of human beings who have, do, and will live in the world are saved. That makes the scandal still more scandalous. God loves but a few and judges the many? The Second Coming will be bad news for almost everyone and good news for but a relative few? Is this what we are taught to believe in Holy Scripture? Many have thought so, as we will see, and for good reasons. Many have not, also for good reasons. What should we think?

You see, sovereign grace, salvation by grace would not rankle people as it does if almost all people at last are chosen, redeemed, and welcomed into eternal life, with only your occasional Genghis Khan or Adolph Hitler passed over. Karl Barth, the influential 20th century German theologian was a very strong predestinarian. He believed that salvation was God’s doing, not man; God’s gift, not man’s achievement in even the smallest part. But his doctrine of divine sovereignty in salvation was not nearly so offensive as it has usually been because Barth seemed to include all, or virtually all human beings among those who were the objects of that salvation. God does it, but he does it for everyone.

But, it is a very different thing to say that God saves sinners, the sinners he has loved and given to his Son to redeem, and only those sinners, *but then go on to say* “many are called but few are chosen.” God has chosen a few and passed by a great multitude. This has made the entire idea of sovereign grace and salvation by God’s grace a much more threatening thing, for it, so it has

seemed to many, ends up being a cause of more bad news than good and makes God more a God of wrath than a God of love because more of the human beings he created will experience his wrath than his love.

Mark Twain caricatured the doctrine in this way in *Tom Sawyer* in his famously sarcastic description of a church service Tom had to endure.

“The minister gave out his text and droned along monotonously through an argument that was so prosy that many a head by and by began to nod – and yet it was an argument that dealt in limitless fire and brimstone, and thinned the predestined elect to a company so small as to be hardly worth saving.”

Well, if so, that was a miserable preacher of Christ, but you see the problem and the scandal and the objection, and, no doubt, you feel the weight of that if you are a Christian and are thinking about your faith. The future is one thing if only a comparatively few people are saved and the vision of biblical eschatology is one thing, it would be another altogether if the largest number of people who lived and died in this world were, in fact, to be saved.

Is grace for the small minority and wrath for the great host? Can it then be said that where sin abounded, grace much more abounded, or that Jesus Christ is the savior of the world? Well, what does the Scripture say? What is its vision of the future of mankind? How does it see the Second Coming dividing the race?

Well, it cannot be denied, *in the first place*, that all through the Bible there is evidence of the minority and even the scarcity of the saved among the population of the world *and very often even among the population of the church*.

1. The whole world lay in unbelief at the time of the flood and but one man and his family were spared.
2. Of the generation that God brought out of Egypt on eagles' wings only a few were the children of God in heart and, by the express testimony of the Scripture, only a few were saved: Moses, Joshua, Caleb with their families and some others perhaps.
3. During the period of the Judges Israel seems largely to have been an unbelieving community.
4. Israel and Judah after the reign of Solomon were largely kingdoms full of apostate and unbelieving people. In Israel during the reign of Ahab we know for a fact that only some 7000 had remained faithful to the Lord and were, by his own express testimony, his true people. In Jeremiah's day in Judah, his was a voice crying in the wilderness. He speaks of one from every town and two from every clan being saved. Indeed, in Jer. 3:11 we read the Lord saying that Judah was even more faithless than Israel.
5. And what of the Lord's own day. After his phenomenal and perfect ministry only a few were numbered among his true followers.
6. And after the church's best living and best witness-bearing, after the martyrs and their tremendous testimony, when Constantine converted in the early 4th century it is estimated that still only 1 in 10 of the inhabitants of the Roman empire was a Christian.
7. And what of world history since. During the middle ages there was almost no Christianity outside of Europe and European Christianity was a sorry mixture of truth and superstition that left the largest part of Christendom in a state not so different than Israel in Ahab's day.

8. And what of today? Out of the world's 6 billion people some 2 billion of them are numbered Christians, but of that number hardly anyone would dispute the largest part is nominal or worse. India, soon to be the most populous nation on earth, has been evangelized for more than two centuries and less than 5% of the population is Christian even in name. China has a vigorous Christian church but its numbers represent a small fraction of the total population of that great nation.
9. And what of our own land? The statistics are difficult to interpret because they all represent different approaches to gathering data, but the more serious surveys all indicate that for all the many who will tell a survey-taker that they are Christians only a minority take faith in Jesus Christ seriously and are seeking to follow him with their lives.

But it isn't merely a matter of observation, however consistently the observation of history seems to produce the same conclusion: that real believers are a distinct minority in the world.

The Bible has some very definite statements that confirm the impression made by these historical observations.

1. Matthew 7:13-14: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."
2. Luke 13:23-24: "Someone asked him, 'Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?' He said to them, 'Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to do so.'"
3. Matthew 22:14: At the end and as the conclusion to the Lord's parable of the wedding banquet we read, "For many are invited, but few are chosen."
4. To these statements could be added the Lord Jesus' references to his followers as "a little flock" and the Bible's frequent description of the church as a "remnant."
5. What is more, in regard to the time until and leading up to the Second Coming, that is to the passage of the epoch introduced by the Lord and his apostles we read that "many will turn away from the faith" and that "the love of many will grow cold." [Matt. 24:10, 12] And once, in a passage about the nature of true and persevering faith, the Lord asks, almost plaintively, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"
6. And then there are the texts that seem rather clearly to teach that at the end of this age and, also, if the premillennialists are right, at the end of the millennium, there will be a great uprising against Christ, the believing church, and the gospel. Virtually all eschatological viewpoints leave room for a great tribulation before the Second Coming. Does this not suggest that the world will be in thrall to unbelief not to faith when Christ comes again?

All of this evidence – the Bible's historical narrative, the observation of history, and these biblical statements that suggest that Christian believers will remain a minority among the people of the earth – has led many Christian theologians through the ages to conclude that it is the teaching of the Word of God that, though the number of the saved considered by itself is very large ("a multitude no man can number," "like the sand on the seashore and the stars in the heavens"), relatively it is much smaller than the number of the lost.

Quenstedt, the great scholastic Lutheran theologian, in listing the “attributes of the elect and reprobate” gives first place to the attributes, respectively, of “fewness” and “multitudinousness.” That is the elect are characterized by their fewness, the lost by their multitudinousness. And so many other writers. Indeed, it became a dogma and has its own Latin name: “*paucitas salvandorum*”, the fewness of the saved.

And, understandably, this has led to great offense on the part of many, not only Mark Twain. It has seemed to many to reflect poorly on God and the majesty of his love and on the achievement of Jesus Christ, that he saved so many fewer than were lost.

However, it cannot either be denied, *in the second place*, that there is another strain of biblical teaching on this theme to consider, to set beside the evidence we have just presented for the “fewness of the saved.”

1. There is that very large set of texts in the OT prophets that we have been considering that speak of the Gospel’s golden age. In Isa. 2:2-3 we read, “In the last days the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.’” In Isa. 11:9 we read of the day when “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” Remember, these are not isolated statements. There are a great many that in one way or another, under one image or another, speak of a time of gospel triumph in the world.
2. This is picked up in the NT in a passage like Romans 11:12 where Paul, in speaking about the Lord’s forsaking of Israel for a time and what this has meant for the gospel mission to the Gentiles, says “...if their [that is, the Jews’] transgression means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!” The thought seems to be that a great age of salvation among the Gentiles will follow the return of the Lord in grace to the Jews.
3. What is more, it has been often pointed out that the texts I cited above that are thought to teach that comparatively few will be saved are statements of fact *for the time* and not necessarily prophecies. They do not say that “many are invited but few are chosen” will always be the case and will remain the case to the end. For example, in Luke 13:23-24, the Lord does not give a direct answer to the question that was put to him: “Are only a few people going to be saved?” Rather, he urges his hearers to apply themselves strenuously to their own salvation. Don’t take salvation for granted, he says, and as an argument points them to the incontestable facts that many people who think they are saved are not and that this is true of a great many of their contemporaries. In other words, the Lord is urging his disciples not to concern themselves with hypothetical issues when the very real and present *issue of their own salvation* needs to be seriously addressed. Nothing is easier to do than to distract a soul from the one absolutely necessary issue that must be pressed to its end.
4. Even the parable of the wedding banquet in Matt. 22, can be seen as chiefly applying to the Lord’s own day and the offering of the kingdom to unwilling Jews, his own contemporaries and countrymen.
5. And what of the grand vision of Phil. 2:10 that because of Christ’s victory over sin and death the day would come that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on

earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”?”

6. And, regarding the tribulation, the Bible is simply not forthcoming enough for us to know what that would mean to the comparative numbers of believers and unbelievers. Nor do we know how long the golden age will last and, so, how many may be brought to faith during that time compared to those who remain unbelievers until the end.

Now, if you are an amillennialist, it may be more doubtful that you could see the numerical minority of the redeemed reversed. If you do not expect a great day of worldwide salvation, first for the Jews and then the Gentiles, at some period prior or immediately after the Second Coming, it is hard to see how the numbers could be reversed.

But if you are a millennialist, a chiliast, whether of the pre- or post- variety, and look forward to a mighty work of God’s grace in the world, unlike anything that has ever been seen or experienced heretofore, you can rather easily see the numerical inferiority of the believing church overcome. If you are a postmil you expect a great revival, a revival of unprecedented proportion to sweep the earth. If you are a premil you can believe that upon the appearance of Jesus Christ, upon his establishment of his kingdom in the world, great hosts of people will become his followers. In the only other period like the millennium of premillennialism, when the risen Christ was among the people of the world, there was salvation. There was Thomas who believed because he saw the wounds in Christ’s body. And, apparently, he appeared to his siblings – up to that point unbelievers – and they believed in him and so are found among the disciples in Acts 1. Well, why should we not believe that the same would happen on a vast scale should he appear in his glory to the whole world?

And, when you add to that fact what we know now about population growth (how it grows geometrically and not arithmetically), how half the people who have ever been alive are alive today! – I say, it is not hard to combine that fact with the Bible’s vision of the gospel’s golden age to except a radical shift, even within a single generation or two, of the relative numbers of the saved and the lost, resulting in a far larger number in heaven than in hell.

This was the viewpoint of many Reformed and Presbyterian theologians, Charles Hodge, Robert Dabney, William G.T. Shedd, and Benjamin Warfield to name just some among the Americans. It was also the view of Charles Spurgeon. Here is an extract from one of his sermons:

“Some narrow-minded bigots think that heaven will be a very small place, where there will be a very few people, who went to their chapel or their church. I confess, I have no wish for a very small heaven, and love to read in the Scriptures that there are many mansions in my Father’s house. How often do I hear people say, ‘Ah! strait is the gate and narrow is the way, and few there be that find it. There will be very few in heaven; there will be most lost.’ My friend I differ from you. Do you think that Christ will let the devil beat him? That he will let the devil have more in hell than there will be in heaven? No: it is impossible. For then Satan would laugh at Christ. There will be more in heaven than there are among the lost. God says, that ‘there will be a number that no man can number who will be saved;’ but he never says that there will be a number that no man can number that will be lost. There will be a host beyond all count who will get into

heaven. What glad tidings for you and for me! For if there are so many to be saved why should not I be saved? Why should not you? Why should not you man, over there in the crowd, say, ‘Cannot I be one among the multitude?’ And may not that poor woman there take heart, and say, ‘Well, if there were but half-a-dozen saved, I might fear that I should not be one; but since many are to come, why should not I also be saved? Cheer up, disconsolate! Cheer up, son of mourning, child of sorrow, there is hope for thee still! I can never know that any man is past God’s grace. There be a few that have sinned that sin that is unto death and God gives them up; but the vast host of mankind are yet within the reach of sovereign mercy – ‘And many of them shall come from the east, and from the west, and shall sit down in the kingdom of heaven.’” [NPS, I, 303]

Now, what do you think? When history is over and the story of this world is finally told, will believers be a minority or a majority, will heaven or hell have the larger population? Will the situation that has pertained from the beginning continue to the end, or will there be a great reversal?

I tell you that I am not entirely sure in my own mind though I lean heavily to Spurgeon’s view because the promise of the gospel’s victory in the world seems to me to belong so much to the very center of the Bible’s vision of the future and the consummation. But I admit that there are texts that give me pause. Perhaps the best we can do is a hopeful but reverent silence before God. The Judge of all the earth will do right and, whatever he does, in no way will Satan have beaten the Lord Christ!!! Of that clearly we must not think.

Let me conclude by considering the application of all of this to our own lives.

First let’s remind ourselves what the Lord said in answer to the question put to him, the one time in all the Bible this question was explicitly raised about the relative number of those saved and lost: instead of answering the question in the terms in which it was asked, he turned it into a warning not to take one’s own salvation for granted. As interesting and important as this question is – how many finally will be saved? – it is not as immediately important as this question: are *you* going to be saved? For, whatever we may say about what may eventually be true, right now the saved are comparatively few and a much smaller number than those who *think themselves* saved. We may not allow our curiosity to distract us from what we *do* know: now is the day of salvation for you and me!

Take the Lord’s warning to heart: “Strive to enter by the narrow gate...for only a few find it; Make every effort to enter by the narrow door...for many will try and will not be able.” As Samuel Rutherford wisely wrote in a letter to a friend: “It is dangerous to be loose in the matter of your salvation. Few are saved: men go to heaven in ones and twos, and the whole world lieth in sin.” [Letters, pb ed, 104]

And William Guthrie adds to that thought this: “If people would believe this, it might help to alarm them.” [The Christian’s Great Interest, 119-120]

Second, besides warning and solemnizing let’s also take the comfort and consolation that

is here. If it is natural to ask, “Can we be sure of something so few believe in?” Are we right and so many others wrong? Well, take comfort from the fact that the Lord told us to expect this and it has always been so. The world may count noses, but no one does who wishes to find the truth. “Long ago I ceased to count heads,” said Spurgeon. “Truth is usually in the minority in this evil world.”

R.C. Sproul tells the story of a fellow student of his in his seminary days. He attended Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and its faculty was mostly liberal and unsympathetic to orthodox Christianity. This fellow student was exceptionally bright. They had to develop special courses just for him because he was so far ahead of the rest of the student body. But when R.C. would talk with him about whether he bought the faculty party line or held fast to the Bible and historic Christianity he would say, “Well, R.C., most of the people here are on the other side and only a few are on your side.” Here was a fellow smarter than most of the faculty and yet, at the last, he was counting noses to find out what was true. Many, many people do this and to their great loss.

Hear Rutherford once more:

“A cause is not good because it is followed by many. Men come to Zion in ones and twos out of a whole tribe, but they go to hell in their thousands. The way to heaven is overgrown with grass; there are the traces of but a few feet on that way, only you may see here and there on it the footprints of Christ’s bloody feet to let you know that you are not gone wrong but are still on the right way.” [Whyte, *Samuel Rutherford*, 116]

We may be a minority, but that is just as likely evidence *for* rather than *against* our being right!

Third, give your heart to gratitude and zeal. There may be comparatively few – though the number is still very large considered by itself – but *you* are among that comparative few. So few and yet you, and I!

The straight and narrow way ought not to be trudged! When you know God has made you one of the few that walk it, kick up your heels! Give a shout! Rejoice!

He has revealed his word to Jacob,
His laws and decrees to Israel.
He has done this for no other nation;
They do not know his laws. **Hallelujah!**

Fourth and finally it is perhaps more likely than not that the day will come when our hearts will swell with pride and joy to see the church of Jesus Christ, finally, the apple of most everyone’s eye and vast multitudes, the great majority of people alive in the world at the time, declaring the praises of the one who called them out of darkness into this marvelous light! It won’t occur to you to count noses; there will be too many of them. But you will think, this, at last, is how things ought to be! What will the world be in such a day, when most everyone is a Christian and acting like one?!! Something to ponder, to pray for, and to work for.