

The Bible's doctrine of the remnant, the minority of true believers in the Christian Church as a whole, is both a summons to us and a truth that ought greatly to increase our gratitude and our joy.

“The Remnant”

Romans 11:1-10

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We are in the midst of Paul's long discourse on Jewish unbelief, raised as an objection to his magnificent declaration in the second half of chapter 8 that God's chosen people are safe and secure in his love and in the salvation purchased for them by the Son of God. The fact that the Jews, God's people, had, by and large, not believed in Jesus and had rejected the good news and so were not saved might seem to disprove Paul's confident assertion. The people of God *had* lost their place in the kingdom of God, or so it seemed. The objection was so obvious Paul felt it necessary to raise it himself. He is determined to demonstrate, as he said at the beginning of this entire section of his letter in 9:6, that the Word of God had not failed! In explanation he has said that there was always a two-fold election, to membership in the people of God in an outward sense and, much more significantly, to membership among the called, the justified, and the glorified, as he put it in Romans 8:29-30. He then said in the last part of chapter 9 and the first part of chapter 10 that Israel was fully responsible for the condemnation that would befall her because she willfully refused to believe the good news when it was proclaimed to her. In chapter 11, Paul will complete his consideration of what we might, I suppose, call "*the gospel's Jewish problem.*" That this is what Paul is still discussing is made clear in the first words of the chapter.

Text Comment

v.2 If you remember the use of this same term "foreknow" in 8:29, you will appreciate the nature of the problem Paul is dealing with and the approach he is taking. The term "foreknowledge" is virtually the equivalent of "election" and its use here might lead us then to think that God's election of a people was not definite and not irreversible. If God foreknew Israel and she rejected Jesus, did this not mean that God's elect might fall away, that the salvation of the elect is not secure? It was precisely the fact that so many Jews were *not* saved that Paul is explaining. One could argue, and some of our men have argued, that by speaking of those "whom God foreknew" Paul is speaking only of those Jews within the total population of Israel who were chosen for salvation. In other words, he would be using the same term as he used in Romans 8:29 and using it in the same way – election to eternal life. It is the same word, but is Paul using it in the same way? I don't think so. The use of the term "foreknowledge" here seems rather clearly to refer to the entire people of Israel, for it is *their* situation, indeed *their* unbelief that seems to call God's election into question. Paul is dealing with the question whether Israel's unbelief means that God has rejected his people and his answer is that God has not done so. As the argument proceeds, it will become clear that Paul is asserting that Israel, *even unbelieving Israel*, remains God's chosen people; he insists that she is and remains the people of God, however many Jews may have rejected Jesus and forfeited the hope of salvation. So here Paul is using the term "foreknow" differently than he used the term in 8:29 and the best

commentaries on Romans all accept that fact. It is a conclusion demanded by the flow of Paul's argument. The vocabulary of election is employed in two different ways in the Bible and both of them are found in Paul's exposition of election in Romans 9-11; indeed, it is the fact that the term *has* two uses and meanings that underlies Paul's entire argument. Here in v. 2 "foreknow" is being used in its common OT sense of the election of the nation Israel to be God's special people, not of the specific choice of individuals for salvation. Remember Amos 3:2, for example, where the Lord says to Israel, largely an unbelieving people also in Amos' day: "You only have I *known* of all the nations of the earth." The term has a broader and a narrower use and it is the broader use we have here, the narrower in 8:29. Israel remains God's chosen people in the broader sense and Paul will explain how and why in the verses that follow.

- v.4 In other words, as in the history of Israel in Elijah's time, the time of King Ahab, the fact that the Lord had kept for himself a group of true believers among the people of Israel was proof that God had not abandoned Israel or had given up on her as his chosen people. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, there is an Israel according to the flesh and an Israel according to the Spirit, and God's preservation of the latter community, spiritual Israelites, is the truest fulfillment of his promise to preserve Israel as his people.
- v.5 Again, proof of Israel's special relationship with God is that he has not left Israel without a remnant of true believers who will inherit salvation. This is not Paul's point anywhere in chapter 11 but the fact of the matter is that in all the ages since the Lord has *never* left himself without a remnant of real believers among the people of Israel. The choir sang at the beginning of the service a beautiful anthem by Felix Mendelssohn, a second generation Christian Jew, and we are well aware of many other Jewish Christians who have graced the life of God's people in the ages between the Apostle Paul and ourselves.
- v.6 As not infrequently in Paul, as earlier in Romans, as in Galatians, and as in Paul's sermons as we have them in the Book of Acts, the single alternative is stated baldly: salvation is either by grace – that is, it is God's gift – or it is by works, that is, it is suspended ultimately on what men *do*. One or the other. It can't be both. *Man either makes the difference by what he does or God makes the difference by what he gives.*
- v.7 Once again, as in chapter 9, Paul sums up the situation by reminding his readers that God shows mercy to whomever he wills and he hardens whomever he wills. Israel sought salvation but did not obtain it because she looked for it in the wrong way, as if it were by works instead of by grace, as we read earlier in 9:31 and 10:3. But lying behind this result was the sovereign will of God. Now Paul confirms this divine hardening of Israel by citations from the Old Testament which serve to make several points: God hardens the heart as an act of sovereignty and of judgment. God is always judging, condemning and punishing a people when he hardens their heart. If they will not believe then this is their judgment: they *cannot* believe; he gives them over to the choice they have made. And from these same texts Paul also reminds his readers that this sovereign hardening of the heart is what is happening at present among the Jews, which explains their obduracy, their refusal to face facts when the facts could not have been more clearly demonstrated, profoundly as they were in the miracles wrought by the Lord Jesus himself and by the

Lord's apostles. Jesus used some of the very same texts from the OT to explain the Jews' failure to believe in him during the days of his ministry. This was their sin but it was also God's judgment.

The question with which Paul begins is "Did God reject his people?" In Greek the question is framed so as to expect the answer "No." We might translate it this way: "God didn't reject his people did he?" "God wouldn't do that, would he?" Paul answers his question decisively in the negative but the question itself is certainly a natural one. Having refused to acknowledge Jesus as God's Son, having been the instrument of his cruel death, and having then refused to acknowledge the stupendous fact of his resurrection even to the point of undertaking a systematic persecution of Christ's followers, all of that surely would seem to mean that Israel could no longer claim to be God's people. But, nevertheless, Paul's answer to the question is a resounding "No!" Israel has not been rejected by God. And no wonder Paul is so emphatic. God had long since gone on record as saying that such a thing is impossible. We have statements in the Old Testament like this one in Psalm 94:14:

"For the Lord will not reject his people; he will never forsake his inheritance."

But how can this be true if it is and must be God's work to bring anyone to salvation? If God has not chosen to save the Jews – or at least not chosen to save most of them in Paul's day – has he not rejected them? "No, he has not," says Paul. And the proof comes in two parts. First, there are believers among the Jews, Paul being one of them. In fact, there were many Jewish Christians. At the beginning, when the gospel first set out on its course of conquest through the world after Pentecost, virtually all Christians were Jews. Only gradually did that situation change as more and more Gentiles came to Christ and began to outnumber the Jewish Christians everywhere except in Judea and Galilee. There is a remnant of Jews chosen by grace. That is the first proof that God has not rejected his people. The fact that not all Jews are saved, or even most of them in any particular generation, does not mean Israel has ceased to be the people of God. The second proof, which is explained in the rest of chapter 11, and which we will consider next time, is God's plan eventually to return to the Jews in a great work of salvation near the end of the age. In both these ways it is clear that though this particular generation of Jews, in largest part, will have failed to obtain the salvation of God and will fall under God's judgment, it is by no means the case that God has rejected or written off his ancient people.

Before us this morning is the first demonstration of that fact, the fact that there is a remnant among the Jews, a remnant chosen by grace. The fact that the believing portion of the church is often a small remnant within the church as a whole is, as you know, a commonplace of biblical teaching. It was not only in Elijah's day that true believers represented a small fraction of the population of the people of God as a whole. God's grace is not taken entirely away from his people as a whole; there are some who believe and are saved. God pitches his love upon some to maintain among his people a core of true faith, devotion, and obedience. The idea of true faith existing within a remnant, a minority of the church, is frequently found in the OT prophets.

Now what is so significant about this teaching of Paul in the first 10 verses of chapter 11 is not that it explains some long ago historical phenomenon, very interesting to Paul's readers but largely irrelevant to us. No, what makes the spiritual history of Israel so crucial for us to

understand is that Israel was, after all, the church of God in her day and her history is the history of the church. And the pattern of that history, as it is described in Holy Scripture, has proven to be the pattern of the church's life and history ever since. The significance of the remnant is not that it appears as a fact of history in Israel's case. The significance of the remnant chosen by grace is that this has continued to be the story of God's people ever since. Throughout the history of the Christian church since NT times, again and again the community of the truly believing, the devout, the committed has been found to be a minority within the entire church. Those who genuinely embraced the gospel of Christ in the medieval church represented a small portion of the total population of the church. The majority of Christians were nominal, that is, Christians in name only. They were Christians outwardly, but not inwardly in just the same way Paul has said in Romans 2 that most of the Jews of his day were Jews only outwardly. And that was still the case at the time of the Reformation; it became the case again in the 17th century in the Protestant church. I will leave it to serious-minded, thoughtful Roman Catholics to say whether at any point in the history of their church since the Middle Ages true gospel belief, genuine love for God demonstrating itself in a life of commitment to his commandments and to the service of the gospel in the world has ever been the possession of more than a remnant of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Church, our theologians say, is a *corpus mixtum*, a mixed body, by which they mean it contains believers and unbelievers mixed together. And often, in places and times the unbelievers have far outnumbered the believers. Of the two billion or more Christians in the world today, how many are Christians as Paul describes Christians in his letters: wearing their loyalty to Jesus Christ on their sleeves and living their lives for him? And how many of the 2 billion are only so-called Christians?

Unbelievers in the church come in two very different types but there have usually been multitudes of both. *First*, there are those who profess to be Christians, who insist on their place in the Christian church, but who deny the plain-speaking of the Bible and whose beliefs are virtually unrecognizable as historically or biblically Christian. This has been true from the earliest days. It was true in Israel when priests and people alike insisted upon their credentials as the people of Yahweh but, at the same time, eagerly embraced the idolatry of the people around them. And it has been true ever since in Christendom. And it is so today.

You know the name Christopher Hitchens. He's one of the new breed of atheists who made a splash with books touting unbelief in God as the path to true enlightenment for the world. Hitchens' bestseller was *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Well recently Hitchens was interviewed on the radio by a Unitarian minister by the name of Marilyn Sewell. She posed this question to Hitchens.

“The religion you cite in your book is generally the fundamentalist faith of various kinds. I'm a liberal Christian, and I don't take the stories from the scripture literally. I don't believe in the doctrine of atonement (that Jesus died for our sins, for example). Do you make a distinction between fundamentalist faith and liberal religion?”

Hitchens replied:

“I would say that if you don’t believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ and Messiah, and that he rose again from the dead and by his sacrifice our sins are forgiven, you’re really not in any meaningful sense a Christian.”

Good for Hitchens! An outsider can see with perfect clarity what multitudes within the church cannot. If you don’t believe what the Bible says, if you don’t believe its history or its doctrine, you should not call yourself a Christian. This woman does, but she should not. It is dishonest. Whatever it is she believes, the one thing it *is not* is Christianity. But, the fact is, the church has for ages been full of people whose doctrine and teaching is the straightforward repudiation of the teaching of Christ and his apostles. It has been a truism during large stretches of the history of the Church of England that the only thing harder to find than faithful gospel preaching in an Anglican parish was a gospel believing bishop! In many parts of Christendom today, outright denial of biblical teaching is the norm, not the exception, leaving those who hold fast to the faith once delivered to the saints a minority, a remnant within the larger body of the church. In that sense the Presbyterian Church in America, to which we belong, is a remnant church. It holds fast to biblical teaching long since given up in the churches from which she sprang.

But the remnant exists for another reason than that a majority has embraced a viewpoint directly contrary to the teaching of Holy Scripture. There have been, always have been, many in the church who would profess the doctrine alright, but who have little real interest in living for Christ. They are nominal Christians in another sense, Christians in name only. If asked they might give proper answers to questions concerning the faith, but there is little in their lives that demonstrates any meaningful loyalty to Jesus Christ. They are, in fact, a dead weight in the church, contributing nothing to the vitality and sincerity of her worship, to her witness to the world, to the living communion of the body of Christ. *They are in the church but they are of the world.* The numbers of such Christians can often be very large, as, for example, in some of the state churches of the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe. When studying in Scotland and filling pulpits on the Lord’s Day, again and again I encountered congregations of the Church of Scotland in which were to be found only a few true believers, usually older folk who had spent their lives longing for some other real Christians to show up in their parishes. The numbers of nominal Christians of this type in such churches have often been so large as to leave genuine, sincere, determined followers of Christ in the same churches a tiny fraction of the whole. The reality of a remnant, then, is a fact of church history since Pentecost as surely as it was a fact of Israel’s history.

What then, are we to take from this teaching of Paul about the remnant chosen by grace? Let me suggest three things.

I. First, it provides us with a stern warning against following the crowd.

There is a very strong temptation to which all human beings are subject to determine the truth by counting noses. Whether we are talking about the noses in our own small community or the noses of an entire society of people, we find it easy to go along with the majority. People in the church are hardly immune to this temptation. We find it difficult, counter-intuitive, to think that large numbers of people like us would all be wrong. A great deal of the conviction people have about many of the ideas that shape the thinking and the living of the modern Western world is

the result of little more than the general popularity of those ideas. Ask anyone why he believes in evolution and it will not take long to discover that he knows very little about the arguments for and against and is usually misinformed about the evidence he imagines must exist. He believes it because everyone else does. But as human history, as the history of thought, and the history of science have all too often proved, the emperor often is not in fact wearing any clothes.

When a million high school seniors taking the SAT a few years back answered a survey meant to measure their views of themselves, 70% rated their leadership ability above average and only 2% rated it below average; when in terms of getting along with others 0 rated themselves below average and 25% rated themselves in the top 1%, we are left thinking that perhaps the majority viewpoint leaves something to be desired as a way of getting at the facts. When in a 2006 survey 94% of Americans said they were above average in honesty, 86% above average in intelligence, and 79% above average in looks, we can be forgiven for thinking that counting noses may not be the best way to get at the truth after all. Pride, foolishness, the desire to be accepted, and sentimentality – the tendency to believe what you want to be true – all contribute profoundly to the beliefs people have.

The biblical doctrine of the remnant is a powerful reminder to us that the truth is not always, perhaps not even usually found in the opinion of the majority in this world, a world gone over to pride, sin and rebellion against God. The truth is often found in the small enclave of those whose minds and hearts remain free to heed the Word of God and to think with a resolute honesty about life. And whatever this may tell us about the thinking of human society in general, it certainly puts us on the lookout against falsehood and insincerity appearing within the church. It has been the church's *bane* throughout the whole course of her existence that she must *drag* along with her so many who have no heartfelt conviction of the glory of Jesus Christ, of his lordship, or of the surpassing great privilege it is to know him as our Savior from sin and death. Nothing has so diminished the church's witness to the world as the presence within her membership of so many who do not love Christ and do not live the Christian life. We shouldn't count *those* noses if we want to get at the truth!

II. *Second, the doctrine of the remnant is a warning to all Christians to be sure that our faith is genuine and being demonstrated in a life of real, practical, commitment to the Lord Jesus and his cause.*

Serious Christians have some difficulty believing that anyone would think that belonging to the church is itself some talisman that wards off the wrath of God. Surely no one can think that who has any understanding of what Jesus Christ did for us and our salvation or of the stupendous fact that human beings can know and walk with the Son of God themselves while they are still in this world, walk with him as really as did his twelve disciples during the three years of his public ministry. No one who knows Jesus will ever think that he would be impressed by something as outward and insignificant in itself as membership in the church and occasional attendance at services all the while continuing to live as unbelievers do.

But the fact is, the only way to account for the fact that so many people belong to the Christian church whose beliefs and whose way of life demonstrate that they have no true sympathy with the gospel of Christ or with his lordship *is that a great many people are hedging their bets.*

But it is good for sincere believers to hear that. It makes them take seriously the temptations of an insincere profession if vast multitudes of people are indulging one and to take care to avoid a creeping worldliness that has already overcome a great many people, and to examine themselves to ensure that they are in fact as well as in name the followers of Jesus Christ.

And it is good for the nominal Christian to be forced to hear this teaching about the remnant, as often as it is brought up in Holy Scripture. The possibility of being a Christian in name only, the fact that untold multitudes of Christians have been this and only this kind of Christian, are truths that have many, many times forced themselves upon nominal Christians and awakened them from their spiritual sleep. I think, for example of the 19th century Anglican priest, William Haslam, who in the middle of a sermon he was preaching to his congregation on the false thinking of so many Jews when they encountered Jesus of Nazareth, realized that he was just like them; that, though supposedly a Christian, even a Christian minister, he did not really believe in Jesus and was not really following him. Haslam was ever thereafter known as the parson converted by his own sermon. But it was the reality of unbelief *in the church* that gripped him that long ago Lord's Day.

And there have been multitudes of Christians of the outward sort who have become, by God's grace, Christians of the inward sort who became so because they realized that it was possible to be a Christian and not be a Christian at the same time. I told you last week of the famous guitarist Christopher Parkening, a baptized Christian who as a boy during a week of Vacation Bible School, challenged by his teacher to do so, even evangelized a neighborhood friend. But Parkening was nevertheless not a Christian in truth until years into his adulthood. This is one of a great many ways in which we are urged in Holy Scripture to make our calling and election *sure!*

III. Third and finally the doctrine of the remnant ought to increase every serious Christian's gratitude to God, his or her sense of amazement at God's grace to him or her.

The fact is Christians of all types are a minority in the world. But genuine believers, those who truly love the Lord, have embraced his gospel, have felt eternal life coursing through their souls, are a smaller minority still. And here we are, part of that minority of a minority, not because of anything we are or have done but because the Lord pitched his love on us, because Christ bore in our place the punishment due our sins, and because the Holy Spirit came into our hearts to turn us to Christ. The remnant, Paul reminds us, is chosen by grace.

It is a great privilege to belong to the church of God, but multitudes belong to the church who make nothing of the privilege, who care little or nothing for Christ and his kingdom. They hear the Word of God preached of a Sunday, they sing the great hymns of the church's worship, they rub shoulders with people who really believe and really care about God and salvation, but it leaves scarcely a mark upon them. They go home and live their lives as if there were not Jesus Christ, no cross, no empty tomb, to heaven and no hell. *That* so easily might have been us! But it has not been. Or, my friend, has it been so with you? Search your heart. You know what kind of Christian you are if you will only be honest with yourself!

We serious Christians look around and find in the unbelieving world people who are so much more impressive than we are; people who, if the truth be told, often seem to be better people than we are; at least, so it seems to us. And yet here we are in the church and in that part of the church where true salvation is found, rejoiced in, and lived out day after day and week after week. How can this be? It is because we are twice favored; twice made the people of God. Grace has been given to us as it were two times, grace upon grace: to be a Christian in the first place and to be a Christian indeed in the second!

It is sad, indeed, that so often sincere believers in Jesus form only a remnant in the whole church. But it is wonderful beyond words to belong to that remnant. We have more to thank God for than anyone else in the world; more reason for a shudder to pass up and down our spine at the thought of what might so easily not have been; more reason to stand utterly amazed before the grace of God that has been lavished upon us; more reason to be determined to live worthy of the grace we have received. We might so easily have got into the church and no further!

It is people like C.T. Studd, the famous English cricket star, turned Christian missionary, who express the mind and heart of a remnant Christian: "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then there is no sacrifice too great for me to make for him." People *in* the church but *of* the world don't think like that or speak like that. Real Christians do.