
THE MAN IN THE IRON CAGE — THEOLOGY

THE DOCTRINE of reprobation is not a topic one often finds discussed in casual Christian conversation or preached from pulpits on any given Lord's Day. Neither is it a doctrine that excites hope and anticipation in the believer. Nonetheless, reprobation was a part of John Bunyan's worldview and formed a constituent part of his preaching and teaching.

In the seventeenth century there were three major views held by eminent figures of the day. Men like John Owen and Archbishop James Ussher held that reprobation was a real and definite decree of God in His rejection of certain men from eternity past—God has chosen some for eternal life and others for eternal damnation (also known as “double predestination”). Richard Baxter and others believed that reprobation would involve God simply bypassing some without ever effectually drawing them—a kind of non-election. The Arminian view of the day regarded man as the starting point of reprobation. When men neglect, refuse or abuse all the means of grace afforded them in the gospel and willfully choose to live a life of profaneness, then God in time may turn them over to a reprobate mind, but not because He had earlier ordained them to be this way or because He withholds saving grace from them.

It appears that Bunyan may have embraced a more moderate view of reprobation as a kind of non-election—God has chosen some for eternal life and has bypassed others. Yet at the same time Bunyan would assert that men go into eternal condem-

nation because they willfully and deliberately choose evil over righteousness. A place where this can be clearly seen is in a part of a detailed flow chart drawn up by Bunyan himself entitled, *A Map Showing the Order and Cause of Salvation and Damnation*. Over the “dark” side of this *ordo salutis* Bunyan writes in verse:

These lines are black, and so are those
That do eternal life oppose,
Which those will do most willingly,
Whom God doth leave to live and die.

Thus from the man-ward side, the man in the iron cage is the one who has willingly and deliberately turned his back on God's grace as it was offered to him in the gospel and thus finds himself in a most wretched state of soul anguish.

The testimony of the man is “God hath denied me repentance.” The interesting thing about this is the response of the Interpreter to Christian's question, “Is there no hope for such a man as this?” Answer: “Ask him, said the Interpreter.”

It seems to remain an open question whether the free offer of the gospel in Christ is still a *bona fide* overture to those who have been turned over to a reprobate mind by God (Romans 1:28). Bunyan does not totally commit himself to the idea that the man in the cage has committed the unpardonable sin (whatever that may be). He simply says, “Ask him.”
