

Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God

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Outline and Notes

Due to the vast nature of the subject of divine sovereignty, it will be spoken of in this work only insofar as it concerns evangelism. Divine sovereignty may be defined as God's "almighty action in bringing helpless sinners home through Christ to himself.

The specific aim of this work:
demonstrate that faith in God's sovereignty does not paralyze belief in human responsibility
demonstrate that faith in God's sovereignty does not inhibit evangelism
demonstrate that faith in God's sovereignty gives us strength to persist in evangelism.

I. Divine Sovereignty

1. No intention of proving that God is sovereign in His world (one fact shows this)
 - 1.1. True Christians pray and the basis of prayer is the recognition of God's sovereignty
 - 1.2. Prayer is an acknowledgment of helplessness and dependence
 - 1.3. Every time you as Christians pray, you are confessing your own helplessness and God's sovereignty
2. No intention of proving that God is sovereign in salvation (two facts show this)
 - 2.1. You give thanks to God for your salvation
 - 2.1.1. You know that you did not save yourself
 - 2.1.2. You know that it was not chance or an accident
 - 2.1.3. You do not attribute it to your own wisdom or judgment or good sense
 - 2.1.4. You know that it was not the result of your own work
 - 2.1.5. You take the blame for your past sin
 - 2.1.6. You do not split the gratitude between yourself and God
 - 2.2. You pray to God for the salvation of others
 - 2.2.1. You do not pray that God will bring them to a point where they can save themselves
 - 2.2.2. You pray under the assumption that God can bring people to faith
3. God's sovereignty in salvation is a long-standing controversy.
 - 3.1. This should not be a controversy since all Christians believe in divine sovereignty, some are not aware that they believe in it, and some imagine they don't.
 - 3.2. Reasons why this is so:
 - 3.2.1. Intrusion of rationalistic speculations
 - 3.2.2. Passion for systematic consistency
 - 3.2.3. Reluctance to recognize the existence of mystery and let God be wiser than men
 - 3.2.4. Consequent subjecting of the Scripture to the supposed demands of human logic
 - 3.3. People see the Scriptural teaching of human responsibility and do (cannot) see how it is consistent with God's sovereignty.
 - 3.3.1. They refuse to let the two truths lie side-by-side
 - 3.3.2. They think that to accept the one truth they must reject the other

- 3.3.3. It is natural to our fallen minds to over-simplify the Bible and cut out its mysteries
- 3.3.4. The irony is that the prayers of both sides reveal that those who profess to deny it believe it just as much and as strongly as those who affirm it.
- 3.3.5. On our feet we may disagree, but on our knees, we are all agreed.

II. Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom

1. The reconciliation of these truths not easy
 - 1.1. It is an antinomy – an apparent contradiction; two truths standing side-by-side that both have cogent reasons for believing them
 - 1.2. It is not a paradox because it is not a mere figure of speech nor an easily comprehensible problem
2. The only way to handle an antinomy is to accept it and learn to live with it.
 - 2.1. Reject the idea of a contradiction
 - 2.2. Do not put the two in opposition to one another
 - 2.3. Use each truth within its sphere of reference
 - 2.4. Note the connections and learn to think of each within their own spheres of reference
 - 2.5. Learn to let the two truths peacefully coexist
3. The reconciliation of these truths
 - 3.1. Scripture teaches that God controls all things, human actions included, and disposes things in accordance with his eternal purpose.
 - 3.2. Scripture teaches that hearers of the gospel are responsible for their actions and those who receive the gospel are responsible for spreading it.
 - 3.3. These two truths are taught side-by-side in the Bible, sometimes in the same verse (Luke 22:22; cf. Acts 2:23).
 - 3.4. The dilemma seems inexplicable
 - 3.5. We ought not to be surprised when we find mysteries of this sort because the Creator is incomprehensible to his creatures (and this is only one of a number the Bible contains).
 - 3.6. Our minds don't like antinomies because we like to have everything tied up neatly with no loose ends.
 - 3.7. Because of this tendency, we seek to resolve antinomies by illegitimate means: to suppress or alter one truth for the sake of another. In this case, we either
 - 3.7.1. assert man's responsibility in a way that excludes God from being sovereign, or
 - 3.7.2. affirm God's sovereignty in a way that destroys the responsibility of man.
4. The way in which these temptations [of thought and reasoning] occur:
 - 4.1. An exclusive concern with human responsibility
 - 4.1.1. Human responsibility is a fact.
 - 4.1.1.1. We need the gospel and are responsible for the decision we make concerning it.
 - 4.1.1.2. Many, when confronted with the gospel, will try to blind themselves to the gravity of the issue.
 - 4.1.1.3. When we present the gospel, we must constantly emphasize the fact that we are responsible to God for how we react to it.

- 4.1.2. We are also responsible for sharing the good news.
- 4.2. An exclusive concern with divine sovereignty
 - 4.2.1. Some have recently discovered this truth or when they discovered this truth it brought a radical change in their outlook.
 - 4.2.1.1.They now have a God-centered outlook and realize that their man-centered outlook was sinful.
 - 4.2.1.2.They now realize that their “chief end” is to glorify God and their primary goal is to glorify God in every situation.
 - 4.2.2. They have discovered that while God uses man, he does not need man nor does he depend on man to accomplish his purposes.
 - 4.2.2.1.They see that the God who sent man can do without him.
 - 4.2.2.2.They bear practical witness to their belief that God is sovereign and recognize that the fruitfulness of their service depends on God.
 - 4.2.3. These believers fall into the opposite temptation as those above: In their zeal to glorify God and to acknowledge his sovereign grace, they are tempted to lose sight of the church’s responsibility to evangelize.
 - 4.2.3.1.An example is the chairman of the minister’s committee who told William Carey, “Sit down, young man, when God is pleased to convert the heathen, he will do it without your help or mine!”
 - 4.2.3.2.This man’s mistake was in not giving equal seriousness to the church’s evangelistic responsibility.
 - 4.2.3.3.The parable of the talents (Matt.25:14-30) and the words of the Savior in Matt. 5:14-16 remind the church of her stewardship of the Gospel and the role evangelism plays in the life of a faithful servant of Jesus Christ.
- 5. These are the two pitfalls of error.
 - 5.1. Each is a partial blindness and results from the failure to face squarely the biblical antimony of human responsibility and divine sovereignty.
 - 5.2. We must believe both of these doctrines with all our might.
 - 5.3. We must keep both of these doctrines constantly before us in for the guidance and government of our lives.
- 6. The rest of this study shall proceed from this understanding.
 - 6.1. In this study we shall try to take both doctrines perfectly seriously, as the Bible does and to view them in their positive biblical relationship.
 - 6.2. We shall not oppose them to each other because the Bible does not oppose them to each other. Nor shall we qualify, modify, or water down either of them in terms of the other, for the Bible does not do this either.
 - 6.3. The Bible asserts both truths side-by-side in the strongest and most unambiguous terms as two ultimate facts. This is what we must do in our own thinking.
 - 6.4. C. H. Spurgeon, when asked how he would reconcile these two truths replied, “I wouldn’t try; I never reconcile friends.”
 - 6.5. That is the fact; in the Bible, human responsibility and divine sovereignty are not enemies or even uneasy neighbors, they are friends.