

Divine
Sovereignty
and
Human
Responsibility

*how both biblical truths
coexist in God's grace*

J. I. Packer
1961

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Chapel Library admires J.I. Packer’s knowledge of the Puritans, but
does not agree with his ecumenism, especially his compromise with
the ECT (Evangelicals and Catholics Together) accord.

I. Divine Sovereignty

Is God Sovereign in His World?

I do not intend to spend any time at all proving to you the general truth that God is *sovereign* in His world. There is no need; for I know that, if you are a Christian, you believe this already. How do I know that? Because I know that, if you are a Christian, you pray; and the recognition of God's sovereignty is the basis of your prayers. In prayer, you ask for things and give thanks for things. Why? Because you recognize that God is the author and source of all the good that you have had already and all the good that you hope for in the future. This is the fundamental philosophy of Christian prayer. The prayer of a Christian is not an attempt to force God's hand, but a humble acknowledgment of helplessness and dependence. When we are on our knees, we know that it is not we who control the world; it is not in our power, therefore, to supply our needs by our own independent efforts. Every good thing that we desire for ourselves and for others must be sought from God, and will come, if it comes at all, as a gift from His hands.

If this is true even of our daily bread (and the Lord's Prayer teaches us that it is), much more is it true of spiritual benefits. This is all luminously clear to us when we are actually praying, whatever we may be betrayed into saying in argument afterwards. In

effect, therefore, what we do every time we pray is to confess our own impotence and God's sovereignty. The very fact that a Christian prays is thus proof positive that he believes in the Lordship of his God.

Is God Sovereign in Salvation?

Nor, again, am I going to spend time proving to you the particular truth that God is sovereign in salvation. For that, too, you believe already. Two facts show this.

1. You give thanks for your conversion

In the first place, you give God thanks for your conversion. Now why do you do that? Because you know in your heart that God was entirely responsible for it. You did not save yourself; He saved you. Your thanksgiving is itself an acknowledgment that your conversion was not your own work, but His work. You do not put it down to chance or accident that you came under Christian influence when you did. You do not put it down to chance or accident that you attended a Christian church, that you heard the Christian gospel, that you had Christian friends and, perhaps, a Christian home, that the Bible fell into your hands, that you saw your need of Christ and came to trust Him as your Savior. You do not attribute your repenting and believing to your own wisdom, or prudence, or sound judgment, or good sense. Perhaps, in the days when you were seeking Christ, you labored and strove hard, read and pondered much, but all that outlay of effort did not make your conversion your own work. Your act of faith when you closed with Christ was yours in the sense that it was you who performed it; but that does not

mean that you saved yourself. In fact, it never occurs to you to suppose that you saved yourself.

As you look back, you take to yourself the blame for your past blindness and indifference and obstinacy and evasiveness in face of the gospel message; but you do not pat yourself on the back for having been at length mastered by the insistent Christ. You would never dream of dividing the credit for your salvation between God and yourself. You have never for one moment supposed that the *decisive contribution* to your salvation was yours and not God's. You have never told God that, while you are grateful for the means and opportunities of grace that He gave you, you realize that you have to thank, not Him, but yourself for the fact that you responded to His call. Your heart revolts at the very thought of talking to God in such terms. In fact, you thank Him no less sincerely for the gift of faith and repentance than for the gift of a Christ to trust and turn to. This is the way in which, since you became a Christian, your heart has always led you. You give God all the glory for all that your salvation involved, and you know that it would be blasphemy if you refused to thank Him for bringing you to faith. Thus, in the way that you think of your conversion and give thanks for your conversion, you acknowledge the sovereignty of divine grace. And every other Christian in the world does the same.

Simeon's conversation with Wesley

It is instructive in this connection to ponder Charles Simeon's account of his conversation with John Wesley on December 20, 1784 (the date is given in Wesley's *Journal*):

“Sir, I understand that you are called an Arminian; and I have been sometimes called a Calvinist; and therefore I suppose we are to draw daggers. But before I consent to begin the combat, with your permission I will ask you a few questions... Pray, Sir, do you feel yourself a depraved creature, so depraved that you would never have thought of turning to God, if God had not first put it into your heart?”

“Yes,” says the veteran, “I do indeed.”

“And do you utterly despair of recommending yourself to God by anything you can do; and look for salvation solely through the blood and righteousness of Christ?”

“Yes, solely through Christ.”

“But, Sir, supposing you were at first saved by Christ, are you not somehow or other to save yourself afterwards by your own works?”

“No, I must be saved by Christ from first to last.”

“Allowing, then, that you were first turned by the grace of God, are you not in some way or other to keep yourself by your own power?”

“No.”

“What, then, are you to be upheld every hour and every moment by God, as much as an infant in its mother’s arms?”

“Yes, altogether.”

“And is all your hope in the grace and mercy of God to preserve you unto His heavenly kingdom?”

“Yes, I have no hope but in Him.”

“Then, Sir, with your leave I will put up my dagger again; for this is all my Calvinism; this is my election, my justification by faith, my final perseverance: it is in substance all that I hold, and as I hold it.

And therefore, if you please, instead of searching out terms and phrases to be a ground of contention between us, we will cordially unite in those things wherein we agree.”¹

2. You pray for the conversion of others

There is a second way in which you acknowledge that God is sovereign in salvation. You pray for the conversion of others. In what terms, now, do you intercede for them? Do you limit yourself to asking that God will bring them to a point where they can save themselves, independently of Him? I do not think you do. I think that what you do is to pray in categorical terms that God will, quite simply and decisively, save them: that He will open the eyes of their understanding, soften their hard hearts, renew their natures, and move their wills to receive the Savior. You ask God to work in them everything necessary for their salvation. You would not dream of making it a point in your prayer that you are not asking God actually to bring them to faith, because you recognize that that is something He cannot do. Nothing of the sort! When you pray for unconverted people, you do so on the assumption that it is in God’s power to bring them to faith. You entreat Him to do that very thing, and your confidence in asking rests upon the certainty that He is able to do what you ask. And so indeed He is: this conviction, which animates your intercessions, is God’s own truth, written on your heart by the Holy Spirit.

In prayer, then (and the Christian is at his sanest and wisest when he prays), you know that it is God who saves men; you *know* that what makes men turn

¹ *Horae Homileticae*, Preface: I.xvii f.

to God is God's own gracious work of drawing them to Himself, and the content of your prayers is determined by this knowledge. Thus, by your practice of intercession, no less than by giving thanks for your conversion, you acknowledge and confess the sovereignty of God's grace. And so do all Christian people everywhere.

Is God Really Lord?

There is a long-standing controversy in the Church as to whether God is really *Lord* in relation to human conduct and saving faith or not. What has been said shows us how we should regard this controversy. The situation is not what it seems to be. For it is not true that some Christians believe in divine sovereignty while others hold an opposite view. What is true is that all Christians believe in divine sovereignty, but some are not aware that they do, and mistakenly imagine and insist that they reject it. What causes this odd state of affairs? The root cause is the same as in most cases of error in the Church—the intruding of rationalistic speculations, the passion for systematic consistency, a reluctance to recognize the existence of mystery and to let God be wiser than men, and a consequent subjecting of Scripture to the supposed demands of human logic. People see that the Bible teaches man's responsibility for his actions; they do not see (man, indeed, cannot see) how this is consistent with the sovereign Lordship of God over those actions. *They are not content to let the two truths live side by side*, as they do in the Scriptures, but jump to the conclusion that, in order to uphold the biblical truth of *human responsibility*, they are

bound to reject the equally biblical and equally true doctrine of *divine sovereignty*, and to explain away the great number of texts that teach it.

The desire to over-simplify the Bible by cutting out the mysteries is natural to our perverse minds, and it is not surprising that even good men should fall victim to it. Hence this persistent and troublesome dispute. The irony of the situation, however, is that when we ask how the two sides pray, it becomes apparent that those who profess to deny God's sovereignty really believe in it just as strongly as those who affirm it.

How, then, do you pray? Do you ask God for your daily bread? Do you thank God for your conversion? Do you pray for the conversion of others? If the answer is "no," I can only say that I do not think you are yet born again. But if the answer is "yes"—well, that proves that, whatever side you may have taken in debates on this question in the past, in your heart you believe in the sovereignty of God no less firmly than anyone else. On our feet we may have arguments about it, but on our knees we are all agreed. And it is this common agreement, of which our prayers give proof, that I take as our starting - point now.

II. Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

Our aim in the present study is to think out the nature of the Christian's evangelistic task in the light

of this agreed presupposition that God is sovereign in salvation. Now, we need to recognize right at the outset that this is no easy assignment.

All theological topics contain pitfalls for the unwary, for God's truth is never quite what man would have expected; and our present subject is more treacherous than most. This is because in thinking it through we have to deal with an *antinomy* in the biblical revelation, and in such circumstances our finite, fallen minds are more than ordinarily apt to go astray.

An “Antinomy” Defined

What is an “antinomy”? *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary* defines it as

“a contradiction between conclusions which seem equally logical, reasonable, or necessary.”

For our purposes, however, this definition is not quite accurate; the opening words should read “an *appearance* of contradiction.” For the whole point of an antinomy—in theology, at any rate—is that it is not a real contradiction, though it looks like one. It is an *apparent* incompatibility between two apparent truths. An antinomy exists when a pair of principles stand side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both undeniable. There are cogent reasons for believing each of them; each rests on clear and solid evidence; but it is a mystery to you how they can be squared with each other. You see that each must be true on its own, but you do not see how they can both be true together.

Let me give an example. Modern physics faces an antinomy, in this sense, in its study of light. There

is cogent evidence to show that light consists of waves, and equally cogent evidence to show that it consists of particles. It is not apparent how light can be both waves and particles; but the evidence is there, and so neither view can be ruled out in favor of the other. Neither, however, can be reduced to the other or explained in terms of the other; the two seemingly incompatible positions must be held together, and both must be treated as true. Such a necessity scandalizes our tidy minds, no doubt, but there is no help for it if we are to be loyal to the facts.

Not a Paradox

It appears, therefore, that an antinomy is not the same thing as a *paradox*. A paradox is a figure of speech, a play on words. It is a form of statement that seems to unite two opposite ideas, or to deny something by the very terms in which it is asserted. Many truths about the Christian life can be expressed as paradoxes. A Prayer Book collect, for instance, declares that God's "service is perfect freedom"—man goes free through becoming a slave. Paul states various paradoxes of his own Christian experience:

- *"sorrowful, yet always rejoicing... having nothing, and yet possessing all things"*
- 2 Cor. 6:10
- *"when I am weak, then am I strong"*
- 2 Cor. 12:10.

The point of a paradox, however, is that what creates the appearance of contradiction is not the facts, but the words. The contradiction is verbal, but not real. A little thought shows how it can be eliminated and the same idea expressed in non-paradoxical

form. In other words a paradox is always *dispensable*. Look at the examples quoted. The Prayer Book might have said that those who serve God are free from sin's dominion. In 2 Cor. 6:10 Paul might have said that sorrow at circumstances, and joy in God, are constantly combined in his experience; and that, though he owns no property and has no bank balance, there is a sense in which everything belongs to him, because he is Christ's, and Christ is Lord of all. Again, in 2 Cor. 12:10, he might have said that the Lord strengthens him most when he is most conscious of his natural infirmity. Such non-paradoxical forms of speech are clumsy and dull beside the paradoxes which they would replace, but they express precisely the same meaning. For a paradox is merely a matter of how you use words; the employment of paradox is an arresting trick of speech, but it does not imply even an appearance of contradiction in the facts that you are describing.

Also it should be noted that a paradox is always *comprehensible*. A speaker or writer casts his ideas into paradoxes in order to make them memorable and provoke thought about them. But the person at the receiving end must be able, on reflection, to see how to unravel the paradox, otherwise it will seem to him to be really self-contradictory, and therefore really meaningless. An *incomprehensible* paradox could not be distinguished from a mere contradiction in terms. The paradox would thus have to be written off as sheer nonsense.

By contrast, however, an antinomy is neither *dispensable* nor *comprehensible*. It is not a figure of speech, but an observed relation between two statements of fact. It is not deliberately manufactured; it is

forced upon us by the facts themselves. It is *unavoidable*, and it is *insoluble*. We do not invent it, and we cannot explain it. Nor is there any way to get rid of it, save by falsifying the very facts that led us to it.

Responding to an Antinomy

What should one do, then, with an antinomy? Please note the following.

- Accept it for what it is, and learn to live with it.
- Refuse to regard the apparent inconsistency as real; put down the semblance of contradiction to the deficiency of your own understanding; think of the two principles as, not rival alternatives, but, in some way that at present you do not grasp, complementary to each other.
- Be careful, therefore, not to set them at loggerheads, nor to make deductions from either that would cut across the other (such deductions would, for that very reason, be certainly unsound).
- Use each within the limits of its own sphere of reference (i.e., the area delimited by the evidence from which the principle has been drawn).
- Note what connections exist between the two truths and their two frames of reference, and teach yourself to think of reality in a way that provides for their peaceful coexistence, remembering that reality itself has proved actually to contain them both.

This is how antinomies *must* be handled, whether in nature or in Scripture. This, as I understand it, is how modern physics deals with the problem of light, and this is how Christians have to deal with the antinomies of biblical teaching.

Antinomy: God as King and as Judge

The particular antinomy which concerns us here is the apparent opposition between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, or (putting it more biblically) between what God does as King and what He does as Judge. Scripture teaches that, as King, He orders and controls all things, human actions among them, in accordance with His own eternal purpose.² Scripture also teaches that, as Judge, He holds every man responsible for the choices he makes and the courses of action he pursues.³ Thus, hearers of the gospel are responsible for their reaction; if they reject the good news, they are guilty of unbelief. “He that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed...”⁴ Again, Paul, entrusted with the gospel, is responsible for preaching it; if he neglects his commission, he is penalized for unfaithfulness. “Necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!”⁵ God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility are taught us side by side in the

² See Gen. 45:8, 1:20; Prov. 16:9, 21:1; Matt. 10:29; Acts 4:27 f.; Rom. 9:20 f.; Eph. 1:11; etc.

³ See Matt. 25; Rom. 2:1-16; Rev. 20:11-13; etc.

⁴ John 3:18; *cf.* Matt. 11:20-24; Acts 13:38-41; 2 Thes. 1:7-10; etc.

⁵ 1 Cor. 14:16; *cf.* Eze. 3:17 ff., 23:7 ff.

same Bible; sometimes, indeed, in the same text.⁶ Both are thus guaranteed to us by the same divine authority; both, therefore, are true. It follows that they must be held together, and not played off against each other:

- Man is a responsible moral agent, though he is also divinely controlled.
- Man is divinely controlled, though he is also a responsible moral agent.

God's sovereignty is a reality, and man's responsibility is a reality too. This is the revealed antinomy in terms of which we have to do our thinking about evangelism.

To our finite minds, of course, the thing is inexplicable. It sounds like a contradiction, and our first reaction is to complain that it is absurd. Paul notices this complaint in Romans 9. "Thou wilt say then unto me, Why does He (God) yet find fault? For who hath resisted His will?" (Rom. 9:19). If, as our Lord, God orders all our actions, how can it be reasonable or right for Him to act also as our Judge, and condemn our shortcomings? Observe how Paul replies. He does not attempt to demonstrate the propriety of God's action; instead, he rebukes the spirit of the question. "Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?" (Rom. 9:20).

The creature has no right

What the objector has to learn is that he, a creature and a sinner, has *no right* whatsoever to find fault with the revealed ways of God. Creatures are

⁶ E.g., Luke 22:22, "the Son of man goeth (to His death), as *it was determined*; but woe unto that man *by whom He is betrayed*" Cf. Acts 2:23.

not entitled to register complaints about their Creator. As Paul goes on to say, God's sovereignty is wholly just, for His right to dispose of His creatures is absolute.⁷ Earlier in the Epistle, he had shown that God's judgment of sinners is also wholly just, since our sins richly deserve His sentence.⁸ Our part, he would tell us, is to acknowledge these facts, and to adore God's righteousness, both as King and as Judge. Our part is *not* to speculate as to how His just sovereignty can be consistent with His just judgment, and certainly not to call the justice of either in question because we find the problem of their relationship too hard for us. *Our speculations are not the measure of our God.* The Creator has told us that He is both a sovereign Lord and a righteous Judge, and that should be enough for us. Why do we hesitate to take His word for it? Can we not trust what He says?

The Creator is incomprehensible to His creatures

We ought not in any case to be surprised when we find mysteries of this sort in God's Word—for the Creator is incomprehensible to His creatures. A God whom we could understand exhaustively, and whose revelation of Himself confronted us with no mysteries whatsoever, would be a God in man's image, and therefore an imaginary God, not the God of the Bible at all. For what the God of the Bible says is this: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways... As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8 f.).

⁷ Rom. 9:20 f.

⁸ Rom. 1:18 ff., 32; 2:1-16.

The antinomy which we face now is only one of a number that the Bible contains. We may be sure that they all find their reconciliation in the mind and counsel of God, and we may hope that in heaven we shall understand them ourselves. But meanwhile, our wisdom is to maintain with equal emphasis both of the apparently conflicting truths in each case, to hold them together in the relation in which the Bible itself sets them, and to recognize that here is a mystery which we cannot expect to solve in this world.

Mistakes we need to guard against

This is easily said, but the thing is not easily done. For our minds dislike antinomies. We like to tie up everything into neat intellectual parcels, with all appearance of mystery dispelled and no loose ends hanging out. Hence we are tempted to get rid of antinomies from our minds by illegitimate means: to suppress, or jettison, one truth in the supposed interests of the other, and for the sake of a tidier theology. So it is in the present case. The temptation is to undercut and maim the one truth by the way in which we stress the other:

- *to assert man's responsibility in a way that excludes God from being sovereign, or*
- *to affirm God's sovereignty in a way that destroys the responsibility of man.*

Both mistakes need to be guarded against. It is worth reflecting, therefore, on the way in which these temptations arise in connection specifically with evangelism.

There is, first, the temptation to an exclusive concern with *human responsibility*. As we have seen, human responsibility is a fact, and a very solemn fact. Man's responsibility to his Maker is, indeed, the fun-

damental fact of his life, and it can never be taken too seriously. God made us responsible moral agents, and He will not treat us as anything less. His Word addresses each of us individually, and each of us is responsible for the way in which he responds—for his attention or inattention, his belief or unbelief, his obedience or disobedience. We cannot evade responsibility for our reaction to God's revelation. We live under His law. We must answer to Him for our lives.

It is necessary, therefore, to take the thought of human responsibility very seriously indeed. But we must not let it drive the thought of divine sovereignty out of our minds. While we must always remember that it is our responsibility to proclaim salvation, we must never forget that it is God who saves. Our evangelistic work is the instrument He uses for this purpose, but the power that saves is not in the instrument: it is in the hand of the One who uses the instrument. Let us not at any stage forget that God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are both true.



Other Materials Available

t – tract, *b* – booklet, *p* – paperback (800 titles available)

Atoning Sacrifice of Christ, The – Pink *b*
Defense of Calvinism – Spurgeon *b*
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Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility is a thoughtful examination of these two important doctrines of the Christian faith as they relate to God's grace in salvation. There is abroad today a widespread suspicion that a robust faith in the absolute sovereignty of God is bound to undermine any adequate sense of human responsibility. The Bible presents both of these as true: 1) God's sovereignty in electing some people to be saved, and 2) all peoples' responsibility to call upon the Lord to be saved. Many err when they try to reconcile these two truths. They either affirm sovereignty and avoid calling men to turn to God; or they focus on encouraging men to "invite Christ into their hearts" and teach that God does not rule sovereignly over all of life. In this booklet, both truths are upheld as vital. One must not be neglected in order to be comfortable with the other. The author shows us how both truths coexist in the infinitely wise economy of God.

J. I. Packer is author of the Christian classic *Knowing God* and many other books, including *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, from which this booklet was abstracted. He is professor of historical and systematic theology at Regent College in Vancouver, Canada.