

A POSITION PAPER DISCUSSING THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD
AND EVANGELISM

A Position Paper
Presented to
Dr. Tim Beougher
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of Christian Evangelism

by
Timothy K. Dunn
tdunn451@students.sbts.edu

09/23/2016

A POSITION PAPER DISCUSSING THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD
AND EVANGELISM

Introduction

The topic of God's sovereignty is often a swift way to polarize a gathering of Christians. While all gathered may assent to the Gospel, supremacy of Scripture and the work of Christ as 'sufficient', it is clear that many hold the Sovereignty of God in one hand and the freedom of humanity in the other, and they go to war using whichever fist they prefer. They are able to bring about an arsenal of Bible verses and test to support their position and have age-old arguments to denigrate and deny the verses and arguments given in an attempt to repudiate them. What Packer has attempted in his little book on this topic is to end hostilities by finding the Biblical middle ground. In this paper, after a brief review of Packer's main arguments and a critique of them, I will present my own position, as I understand it, from Scripture.

Packer's Arguments

Prayer

Packer's first argument was to demonstrate that a praying Christian is a believer in the sovereignty of God. IF a Christian is on their knees, they are acknowledging that anything they pray for is out of their control. This includes thanksgiving for their own salvation (another point he makes is that all Christians acknowledge that salvation is from God alone because they thank Him for it) and also petitions that God would save the lost. As such, all Christians *practice* the sovereignty of God, even if they may proselytize differently.

Scripture

He also argues that, in Scripture, these two doctrines are held in communion with each other. They are not enemies, but friends, he quotes Spurgeon as saying. As such, he is firm that a true Christian cannot attempt to rend Scripture asunder by placing our preference (be it sovereignty or free will) at odds with the other for this is not how Scripture operates. Rather, we must submit to the wisdom of God and accept that both are true, even if our comprehension is limited.

Evangelism

In explaining *what* evangelism is, Packer notes that it is the proclamation of the Gospel, applied to the human condition, with the opportunity to respond to that message by faith and submission to Christ as Lord and Savior. He says, ‘Since the divine message finds its climax in a plea from the Creator to a rebel world to turn and put faith in Christ, the delivering of it involves the summoning of one’s hearers to conversion.’¹ He then argues that our motive in evangelism is to glorify God by our obedience and His power in conversion, as well as a deep love for our neighbor that they would avoid the destination of Hell. Our pleas should rest on these two considerations, and by these same criteria must our ‘programs’ be evaluated.

Divine Sovereignty and Evangelism

Packer makes a case built around the *law* of God and the *plan* of God, in which he states, ‘The former tells man what he should be; the latter settles what he will be. Both aspects of the will of God are facts, though how they are related in the mind of God is inscrutable to us.’² He then articulates that the sovereignty of God does not in permit us to disobey the command to evangelize. There is still a necessity to evangelize because this is how God has sovereignly elected to use His church for His glory. He also notes that the only hope we have *in our evangelism* is because of God’s sovereignty. Rather than arguing that God will save whom He

¹ Packer, J.I., *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), p.45

² *Ibid.*, p. 93

has elected to save, so why bother evangelizing, Packer makes the case that we evangelize because we know God will bless our endeavors because of His sovereign grace and plan to use His church for His glory in evangelism.

My Critique

I thoroughly enjoyed Packer's treatise, and found it to be extremely helpful in articulating a safe and Biblical middle ground between the two extremes. Perhaps the most useful point he made, in my estimation, was in forcing the reader to recognize that Scripture refuses to treat sovereignty and human responsibility as opposing forces. Rather, he made us accept that Scripture holds both in tandem. God is Lord and King, but He is also Judge, and His judgment is just. Once we grasp this truth, that Scripture at once keeps God on the throne but does expect human culpability for rejection of the Gospel, we come to understand greater the necessity of evangelism and our purpose in it. We aren't the saver of souls (another point he makes), but we do get to participate in the work of God through evangelism.

Perhaps my only critique of Packer's work is that, in my opinion, he underplayed the importance of obedience. The whole argument about whether we should evangelize or not (as argued by hyper-sovereignists) is ultimately cut to shreds by the fact that Jesus modeled it, Paul utilized it and, most importantly, God commands it. We don't get to reduce Scripture's commands because we think our theology is deeper or holier. That is a negation of a Biblical theology. We are commanded to evangelize, and to make disciples from all nations. Likewise, free will arguments falter when we simply read that God is the agent of salvation, and our obedience to Scripture forces us to accept that. We cannot deny that, lest we fall prey to hubris, as Packer rightly argued.

My Position

My position aligns strongly with Packer's as I also argue for a middle ground between both extremes. In particular, I lean towards two passages to make my case.

God's Sovereignty in New Covenant is Evident

First, Jeremiah 31 is extremely clear that the work of God in the New Covenant is to circumcise our hearts. God is speaking, and He says, 'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.'³ This passage (coupled with Ezekiel 37) makes it abundantly clear that God is the one who saves the sinner. The human act of human circumcision has been replaced by the act of God circumcising the heart. Rather than the foreskin's removal indicating covenantal relationship, the heart will bear the very law of God. We are unable to do such a spiritual operation, and so we must rest on God's saving work. Note that in this passage, God is the only active agent; humanity is passive. He puts the law within us, He places it upon our hearts, and He is the One who raises us from spiritual death by the power of His Spirit (Ezekiel 37). We are passive recipients of His great grace.

This is shown to us in the New Testament as well. Consider Paul, who writes, 'The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life.'⁴ We cannot force a gift from someone, nor can we steal a gift, nor can we earn a gift. Rather, it is something that is freely given, from a giver (who can refuse to give it) to a recipient. We, who were dead in sin, receive the gift of grace from God's own hand, in His own way, by His sovereign choice. Likewise, Peter reminds his readers that, 'According to His great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,'⁵ and John states that, 'the anointing that you received from him abides in you.'⁶ Furthermore, John argues that the Fatherhood of God is given to us, making us children, and like the human child who cannot choose their father, neither can we choose who our father is, for we are, 'Called children of

³ Jeremiah 31:33

⁴ Romans 6:23

⁵ 1 Peter 1:3

⁶ 1 John 2:27

God.⁷ The New Testament demonstrates the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophets: God is the ‘founder and finisher of our faith.’⁸

Man’s Action in New Covenant is Expected

The clearest example of our responsibility to evangelize is found, I believe, in Matthew 28, where the command to do so is given by Jesus to the disciples and thus subsequently to the church. He commands, ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, reaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.’⁹ In this passage, as Jesus is leaving the disciples to return to heaven, with the promise of a Helper who would come, the expectation is clear that the church is to be actively recruiting, through the power of the Gospel, and the means for doing so is evangelism that leads to converts, which leads to disciples, which leads to discipleship.

This is an important passage because there is a clear command that we must ‘Go’ and there is a clear people to whom we are to go: the whole world. Our evangelism is not to be restricted to the ‘elect’ (for how would we know anyway), and it is a non-negotiable command. There is no clause given that we could utilize to avoid going. Christ says we are to go, into the whole world, participate in evangelism so that we see converts who can be baptised, incorporated into the church and discipled into a deeper understanding of the faith.

Of course, we can also point to the example of Paul who faithfully proclaimed the Gospel, with positive effects in some cities such as Ephesus, and with seemingly little effect in others, such as in Athens. He spread the Gospel message far and wide through evangelism, yet no one would dare suggest he had a faulty view of the sovereignty of God. And likewise Jesus went into all the regions of Palestine declaring that the Kingdom of God is at hand. Furthermore,

⁷ 1 John 3:1

⁸ Hebrews 12:2

⁹ Matthew 28:19-20a

we can see from Acts 1:8 that evangelism throughout the whole world is expected for the locations of ‘Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth’ are given.

As to the recipient’s response, Scripture is clear that the hearer has an obligation to believe; after all, ‘How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed?’¹⁰ Evidently there is an expectation that they are to ‘call’ on God ‘before they believe’ so that they can be saved. But they can only *respond* if they hear, and ‘How are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?’¹¹ The point is clear from Romans 10: God uses the proclamation of the Gospel to save sinners, and they are to respond when they hear it. If they refuse to respond in faith and submission, they will be held accountable before God for their obstinacy, just as those who believe will be blessed with eternal life in the presence of God.

These Doctrines Are One Coin

Again, Matthew 28 is most helpful, because the command to the church is bookended, or sandwiched, between God. Firstly, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,’¹² and, ‘Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’¹³ This is a deliberate device because the only way in which we can go out and proclaim the Gospel is in the power of Christ, and the only way we can deal with rejection, humiliation and even punishment is because of the certainty that Christ is with us and will never forsake us. Indeed, the only way we will ever see any result from our evangelism is by the efficacious power of Christ in our evangelism. He is the one who asks us to participate in His mission, and He will accomplish it, for ‘His word does not return void,’¹⁴ even if that means rejection of the message more often than acceptance.

¹⁰ Romans 10:14

¹¹ Romans 10:14

¹² Matthew 28:18b

¹³ Matthew 28:20b

¹⁴ Isaiah 55:11

Bibliography

Packer, J.I., *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008)