

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND THE SPREAD OF THE GOSPEL

by
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Dr. Rolland McCune has greatly influenced the lives of hundreds of men who passed through the halls of both Central Baptist Theological Seminary (1967 to 1981) and Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary (1981 to the present). I count it a great blessing from the Lord to have received my seminary training under Dr. McCune's instruction here at DBTS. Likewise, it has been a tremendous privilege to serve along side of him in the administration of this seminary. He has been uniquely used of the Lord in my life and in this seminary. His devotion to Christ, diligent service, and unbending dedication to the truth of the Word have been a powerful influence on my life and ministry.

Over the years, one particular element of Dr. McCune's teaching has served both to ignite the hearts of his students and to trigger opposition from those who disagree with it (and have usually never heard it firsthand!). It would be impossible to come away from Dr. McCune's courses on systematic theology, dispensationalism, apologetics, or new evangelicalism without a greater sense of God's glory and a greater recognition of the need for God-centeredness in all things. A critical component of this God-centeredness is a thorough commitment to God's sovereignty. It was under Dr. McCune's teaching that I came to embrace gladly the majestic vision of God presented in Romans 11:36, "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen."²

Yet there seem to be many who fear the concept of God's sovereignty over all things. Contemporary evangelicalism finds itself deeply divided over this issue and how to respond to those who react to the historic conception of God's sovereignty by radically redefining His attributes. While fundamentalism has so far been preserved from this

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²All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the 1995 edition of the NASB.

theological aberration, there does appear to be growing tension about this subject.³ At the bare minimum, the popularity and influence of books such as Dave Hunt's *What Love Is This?*⁴ indicate that strong feelings abound within evangelicalism and fundamentalism.

The relationship between God's sovereignty and the tasks of evangelism and missions is often the central point of tension. Although there is ample evidence from church history that belief in God's sovereign control, even over the bestowal of salvation, provided the kindling for the Great Awakening and the modern missionary movement,⁵ the argument is often made that:

1. Believing that God is sovereign in salvation makes evangelism and missions unnecessary—if the elect will all be saved, then we don't need to worry about telling them or sending missionaries to them.
2. Believing that God is sovereign in salvation makes evangelism and missions illegitimate and unethical—how can you tell a group of people that God will save them when it is possible that they are non-elect?

Obviously, these are serious charges. The second argument focuses on the free offer of the gospel and is not the direct focus of this article. The focus in this article will be on the first objection—does belief in God's sovereign bestowal of the gift of salvation deaden the evangelistic and missionary impulse?

Before we tackle this question, it might be appropriate to lay down a caution about this whole approach to the discussion, namely, that it is a mistake to make evangelistic zeal or missionary motivation the test of biblical truth. In principle, our first commitment must be to the matter of "accurately handling the word of truth," and then we need to think through the ramifications of that truth. This is obviously difficult (perhaps impossible to do completely), but it is the goal toward which we ought to strive. In other words, the approach should be to ask, "What does the Bible teach about salvation?" before we ask, "How does this relate to our commission to proclaim the gospel and engage in missions?" And the answers to both of these questions must be

³E.g., John R. Van Gelderen, "Fatalism versus Faith," available at (http://www.ptwm.org/fatalism_ezine/fatalism_article_1.html); Arlin Horton, "From the President" *PCC Update* (Summer 2004) and Ron Comfort, "The Fruit of Calvinism," available at (<http://www.ambassadors.edu/HTML%20pages/School%20Info/calvinism.htm>).

⁴Dave Hunt, *What Love Is This?* (Sisters, OR: Loyal, 2002). For a critique of this book, see David M. Doran, "What Love Is This? A Review Article" *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 8 (Fall 2003): 101–30.

⁵E.g., Timothy George's biography of William Carey, *Faithful Witness: The Life and Mission of William Carey* (Birmingham, AL: New Hope, 1991), pp. 47–66.

derived from the Scriptures!

In any event, the question to be considered is, "Does believing in God's sovereignty deaden evangelistic zeal and missionary motivation?" Before this question can be answered, it will be necessary to define more precisely what is meant by God's sovereignty. Most believers agree that God is sovereign, but their understanding of that is often radically divergent. Following this clarification, the primary question will be approached from two angles—defensive and offensive. In other words, I want to defend belief in sovereign grace against this accusation and then set forth a case for how these doctrines actually provide positive incentive for both evangelism and missions.

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY OVER ALL THINGS INCLUDING SALVATION

Although most believers agree that God is sovereign, there is considerably less agreement about what that means. Additionally, not all views of God's sovereignty are charged with the criticism of being detrimental to evangelism and missions. Some take God's sovereignty to mean simply that He rules over all things, but not that He has planned or controls all things. Bruce Reichenbach embraces such a view of sovereignty:

God is a sovereign, not a novelist. He does not purpose or dispose everything that happens; his purposes are both general and specific, but they do not include every detail of human existence. Not only does he work through his created natural law, but just as importantly he has (in part) entrusted his program to the hands and feet of people. This means, of course, that at times his plans and purposes are thwarted.⁶

There are two assertions here that need to be addressed: (1) that God's purpose or plan does not include everything that happens; and (2) that God's purposes may at times be thwarted. Both of these represent a novel approach to God's sovereignty that departs from the one presented in the Scriptures. Logically, it seems that the question of whether God's purposes can be thwarted takes precedence over whether He has a purpose for all things, so the assertions will be considered in that order.

Claiming that God's purposes may be thwarted allows maximum latitude for man's freedom, but it contradicts the conclusion Job reached when confronted with God's sovereignty. His assessment was, "I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can

⁶"God Limits His Power," in *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom*, ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Wheaton, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), p. 117.

be thwarted" (Job 42:2). In fact, the ability to carry out all that He has planned is what distinguishes the true and living God from all pretender gods. Consider God's own claim, "Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure'" (Isa 46:9–10). Contrary to the claims of those who trim the concept of God's sovereignty in order to argue for a larger view of man's freedom, the Bible leaves no room for the purposes of God to go unfulfilled or be left unaccomplished.

If none of God's purposes can be thwarted, then efforts to argue for a general kind of sovereignty tend to follow the line of Reichenbach's first assertion, namely, that God does not have a purpose for all things. Boyd recognizes this: "To confess that God can control whatever he wants to control leaves open the question of *how much* God actually does want to control."⁷ The crucial question, then, is whether God has a plan which encompasses all things.

GOD IS SOVEREIGN OVER ALL THINGS

Ephesians 1:11 plainly states that God "works all things after the counsel of His will." This is a profound declaration of the fact that "whatever [God] has planned and decided to do will certainly come to pass."⁸ God's sovereign freedom is a point of praise in the Psalms: "But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases" (115:3); "Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps" (135:6). The biblical evidence reveals that all the events of life are under God's sovereign control:

- Birth and death—The LORD kills and makes alive; He brings down to Sheol and raises up (1 Sam 2:6).
- The rise and fall of rulers—Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God (Rom 13:1); But God is the Judge; He puts down one and exalts another (Ps 75:7).
- The direction a king pursues is in His hand—The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes (Prov 21:1).
- Both bounty and calamity come from His hand—Is it not from the

⁷Greg Boyd, *The God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), p. 51.

⁸Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 117.

mouth of the Most High that both good and ill go forth? (Lam 3:38); In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider—God has made the one as well as the other so that man will not discover anything that will be after him (Eccl 7:14).

- Even the casting of a lot comes under God's control—The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD (Prov 16:33).

The Scriptures also teach that even the sinful acts of the devil and men are under His control so that He accomplishes His purposes. The biblical record regarding Satan's attacks against Job proves this. Satan had to have permission from God: "Then the LORD said to Satan, 'Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not put forth your hand on him.' So Satan departed from the presence of the LORD" (Job 1:12); "So the LORD said to Satan, 'Behold, he is in your power, only spare his life'" (Job 2:6). This is confirmed by Job's response recorded in Job 1:20–21: "Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped. He said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD.'"

Clearly Job recognized that this could not have happened apart from the sovereign control of God. And if Job's conclusion is not sufficient proof, consider the words of the Lord Himself to Satan regarding Job, "he still holds fast his integrity, although you incited Me against him to ruin him without cause" (Job 2:3b).⁹ There is no room in that text for escaping the conclusion that Satan's attacks on Job were very much under God's sovereign control.

The biblical account of Joseph also confirms this exhaustive view of God's sovereign control. Consider Joseph's response to his brothers in Genesis 50:20: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive." In terms of our subject, D. A. Carson effectively draws out the ramifications of Joseph's statement:

He does not picture the event as wicked human machination into which God intervened to bring forth good. Nor does he imagine God's intention had been to send him down there with a fine escort and a modern chariot but that unfortunately the brothers mucked up the plan, and so poor old Joseph had to go down there as a slave—sorry about that. Rather, in one and the same event, God was operating, and his intentions were good, and the brothers were operating, and their intentions were evil.¹⁰

⁹I am grateful to Dr. Robert Bell for bringing this text to my attention.

¹⁰D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL:

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ likewise demonstrates that even the sinful acts of men fall within the eternal plan of God. Peter makes this point clearly in his sermon on Pentecost: "This Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death" (Acts 2:23). That Peter was not alone in this belief is evidenced by the prayer of the believers recorded in Acts 4:27–28: "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur." It is clear that God's plan, established prior to them, included these sinful actions (without ever violating God's holiness).

The point of tension focuses on how God's sovereignty relates to human responsibility. Historically, both Calvinists and Arminians have agreed that God does indeed have an eternal plan which controls all things.¹¹ Their point of disagreement focused on the relationship of God's foreknowledge to His eternal plan. The Arminian position argued that God's knowledge of what men would do was the basis for the determination of His will. It is important to recognize, however, that both of these historic positions view present choices as certain because of God's eternal plan.¹² Returning to the Acts texts, to acknowledge that God's plan encompasses even the sinful acts of humans is, then, something common to all historic, orthodox Christianity, not merely the Calvinistic understanding of it.¹³

God's sovereignty over all things, including an all-inclusive plan which makes all future events certain, has been the historic belief of God's people. The major views have attempted to simultaneously maintain the biblical teaching about God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Although each view believes that the other fails to do so adequately, neither has openly denied either God's sovereignty or human responsibility.

Crossway, 2000), p. 52.

¹¹Robert E. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will* (Nashville, TN: Randall House, 2002), pp. 35, 44.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 36. Greg Boyd acknowledges this agreement and argues that both, therefore, result in a "future that is eternally settled and that God eternally knows it as such." Against this, Boyd argues for an open future (*The God of the Possible*, p. 23).

¹³For persuasive arguments that Open Theism represents a departure from historic, orthodox Christianity, see Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000) or John M. Frame, *No Other God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2001).

GOD IS SOVEREIGN OVER PERSONAL SALVATION

At no place is the tension between the various views of God's sovereignty been highlighted more clearly than regarding the matter of personal salvation. Again, all orthodox believers would assent to God's sovereignty in this area, but their respective understandings of it would be considerably different. At the risk of oversimplification, the dividing line seems to focus on the biblical concept of election. Wayne Grudem's definition of election is helpful for narrowing the discussion and tying it to the subject of this article: "Election is an act of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of his sovereign good pleasure."¹⁴

Not all who embrace God's sovereignty over personal salvation would be willing to embrace this definition of election. And, generally speaking, it would be those who reject this understanding of election that make the charge that such a belief is detrimental to evangelism and missions. A full defense of this view is beyond the scope of this article, but a brief examination of the teachings of Jesus Christ found in John 6 will serve to bring the issues more clearly into focus.

God's Sovereignty in Giving Some to the Son

Jesus taught that there was a group of people who were given to Him by the Father, and these are the ones who will come to Him: "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out" (v. 37). Note the argument that the Lord makes here: those given to Him by the Father are the ones that come to Him. What does He mean by the words, "All that the Father gives Me"? The other uses of this language in John's gospel shed light on its meaning:

- This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day (John 6:39).
- My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand (John 10:29).
- Even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life (John 17:2).
- I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world; they were Yours and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word (John 17:6).
- I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those

¹⁴*Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 670.

whom You have given Me; for they are Yours (John 17:9).

- Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world (John 17:24).
- To fulfill the word which He spoke, “Of those whom You have given Me I lost not one” (John 18:9).

John 17:2 seems to be particularly clear in establishing this point and brings this issue into penetrating focus—the Son has authority over all flesh, but He will give life only to those whom the Father has given to Him. The language is clear that the purpose of Christ’s receiving authority is to give life to those who were given to Him. Laney captures it well:

The purpose clause, introduced by “that” (*hina*), reveals the purpose for which Christ received His authority. The divine authority possessed by Jesus was for the specific purpose of conferring “eternal life” (3:15–16; 3:35–36; 5:24; 10:28). Yet this gift is not conferred indiscriminately. It is granted only to the elect—those “given” to Christ by the Father (cf. 6:37).¹⁵

This same truth is taught in 5:21 (“For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes”) and 17:9 (“I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours”). These texts affirm that God’s will regarding eternal life is both determinative (“to whom He wishes”) and discriminating (“not...on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me”).

Contrary to our contemporary hesitancy about these truths, the Lord confronted those who rejected Him with them. Consider His powerful words to another group of rejecters:

But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one (John 10:26–30).

Here Jesus roots their rejection (“you do not believe”) in the fact that they were not His sheep. His sheep, on the contrary, “hear” His voice and “follow” Him because they were “given to” Him by the Father.

¹⁵J. Carl Laney, *John* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), p. 301.

God's Sovereignty in Drawing Them to the Son

Jesus taught that man has no ability to come to Him apart from the drawing work of the Father: "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:44). The Lord restates this truth in v. 65: "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father." Before anyone can come to Christ, there must be a preceding work by the Father to provide the ability to do so. "The responsibility of men and women in the matter of coming to Christ is not overlooked (cf. John 5:40); but none at all would come unless divinely persuaded and enabled to do so."¹⁶

Man's inability to respond to the gospel apart from God's gracious work is continually at the center of the debate about God's sovereignty and seems to serve as the ultimate dividing line in this debate—at some point the discussion turns to the "freedom of the will." Yet this debate often ignores the fact that both Arminian and Calvinist theologians agree that man's unaided will is in bondage to sin and unable to come to Christ.¹⁷ The Arminian sees this inability overcome via prevenient grace, whereas the Calvinist sees it overcome via efficacious grace, but both acknowledge the inability of man apart from God's grace. Wiley, an Arminian theologian, explains this concept as follows:

Prevenient grace, as the term implies, is that grace which "goes before" or prepares the soul for entrance into the initial state of salvation. It is the preparatory grace of the Holy Spirit exercised toward man helpless in sin. As it respects the guilty, it may be considered mercy; as it respects the impotent, it is enabling power. It may be defined, therefore, as that manifestation of the divine influence which precedes the full regenerate life.¹⁸

It is clear from this explanation that unsaved man, even from the Arminian perspective, is both "helpless" and "impotent," and, subsequently, needs "enabling power." Picirilli acknowledges that prevenient grace, which he prefers to call "pre-regenerating grace," is necessary since "the unregenerate person is totally unable to respond positively, by his natural will, to the offer of salvation contained in the gospel."¹⁹ And he believes that the idea of *drawing* taught in John 6:44 is an example of this pre-regenerating grace.

¹⁶F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 156.

¹⁷Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, p. 151.

¹⁸H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology*, vol. 2 (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1945), pp. 345–46.

¹⁹Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, p. 154.

Prevenient grace, while absolutely necessary, may be finally resisted, so it is not to be confused with the concept of efficacious grace, that is, a grace which effectively produces a saving response to Jesus Christ. The doctrine of prevenient grace seeks to retain the right of ultimate self-determination for the sinner—he or she determines finally whether grace is to be accepted or rejected. The doctrine of efficacious grace is grounded in the belief that salvation is not ultimately determined by the will of man, but by God.

Another dimension of the prevenient grace doctrine is that such grace is extended to all who hear the gospel (versus only to some who hear the gospel).²⁰ But the truths that the Lord teaches in this passage run contrary to this idea. Carson demonstrates the problem for those who advocate prevenient grace from a text like John 6:44:

The thought of v. 44 is the negative counterpart to v. 37a. The latter tells us that all whom the Father gives to the Son will come to him; here we are told that no-one can come to him unless the Father draws him.... The combination of v. 37a and v. 44 prove that this “drawing” activity of the Father cannot be reduced to what theologians sometimes call “prevenient grace” dispensed to every individual, for this “drawing” is selective, or else the negative note in v. 44 is meaningless.²¹

It seems obvious from the passage that those to whom Jesus was speaking had actually heard the gospel; that is why Jesus is confronting their unbelief (cf. vv. 36, 64). While Picirilli correctly acknowledges that this passage teaches that God’s drawing provides enabling power to come to Christ, he seems to ignore the indicators in the text that not all who heard were actually drawn by the Father to Christ.

The same truth is found in John 8:47 (“He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God”) and 10:26–27 (“But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me”). In both passages the Word about Christ is being proclaimed, yet the text is clear that some can “hear” it and others cannot; the difference between them is whether one is “of God” and one of His “sheep.” As Milne notes:

Jesus’ specifying the reason for the Jewish leaders’ failure to believe in him as *you are not my sheep* confronts us with the mystery of divine election and human unbelief. In stressing the call of the Son and the gifting of the Father, Jesus does not eliminate the leaders’ culpability for their rejection of him. Their responsibility is the unuttered premise of every word of judgment he pronounces. But behind and through their

²⁰Ibid., p. 158.

²¹Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 293.

response God is also at work.²²

It seems impossible to deny that this passage teaches that no one *can* come to Christ apart from God's enabling. Attempts made to smooth the rough edge of this truth by arguing that God draws either all men²³ or, at least, all those who hear the gospel²⁴ fall short. The language of this passage will not allow such limitations—not all who hear the gospel are drawn by the Father, only those who have been given to the Son (vv. 37, 65).

God's Sovereignty in Teaching Them

Another difference between the concepts of prevenient and efficacious grace is the certainty with which the latter will accomplish its purpose. Advocates of prevenient grace (God's drawing) teach that it supplies the enabling power needed to come to Christ, but it does not necessarily result in someone doing so. In the words of Picirilli, it "makes faith possible without making it necessary... it does not by itself guarantee the conversion of the sinner."²⁵

This is different from the ministry of the Father described in v. 45. Here Jesus teaches that those who have "heard and learned from the Father" will indeed come to Him: "It is written in the prophets, 'and they shall all be taught of God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me." Note the certainty of the Lord's words: "everyone" that fits a certain description "comes to Me." What is that description? Such people as have "heard and learned from the Father."

It seems clear that the words "heard and learned" are another way of referring to the drawing ministry of the Father since the result of both is coming to Christ. Kent is insightful on this point:

The true believer, therefore, is one who hears the Word of God and that Word is interpreted to his heart by the Holy Spirit. In this way God acts upon men's hearts and creates that spiritual attraction toward Christ that draws men to him. It must not be imagined, however, that this "drawing" is a mere influence which may be wholesome and beneficial if followed, but is not always successful.²⁶

²²Bruce Milne, *The Message of John*, The Bible Speaks Today, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), p. 154.

²³Hunt (*What Love Is This?* p. 338) argues that "the Father is drawing everyone (even through the witness of creation and conscience)."

²⁴Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Freewill*, p. 158.

²⁵Ibid., p. 156.

²⁶Homer A. Kent, Jr., *Light in the Darkness: Studies in the Gospel of John* (Grand

Again, there are parallels to this text in John 8:47 (“He who is of God hears the words of God”) and 10:27 (“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me”).

The critical and debated issue focuses on the effectiveness of God’s drawing, speaking, and teaching ministry. Verse 45 clearly states that all who hear and learn from the Father come to Christ; hearing and learning are not mere enabling that falls short of coming to Christ. In theological terms, v. 45 teaches what is often referred to as God’s effectual call to salvation. Grudem defines the effectual call as “an act of God the Father, speaking through the human proclamation of the gospel, in which he summons people to himself in such a way that they respond in saving faith.”²⁷

This truth clearly establishes God’s sovereignty in the gift of salvation. While all are invited to come to Christ, only those given to the Son experience this inward work that not only enables them to do so, but actually results in their doing so. Because the Father has given them, they come (v. 37); because they have heard and learned from the Father, they come (v. 45).

This same truth is found in the Apostle Paul’s instruction in 1 Corinthians 1:22–24 about the preaching of the gospel:

For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

If the message of Christ crucified is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, how is that any of them come to believe it? Paul’s answer is that some of those who hear the message are “the called” (v. 24). It is obvious that the idea of “called” here does not mean invited; everyone who hears the gospel is invited. Merely being invited does not change the heart from viewing the message as a stumbling block or foolishness. To be “called” in the sense in which this verse uses it is something which effectively transforms the heart so that the same message, Christ crucified, is now viewed as “the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

From any merely human perspective the central message of the Christian gospel must always appear as folly. But to people from both groups this folly turns out to be the very place where God is powerfully at work, calling out a people for his name. Those who are “being saved” (v. 18), the “believing ones” (v. 21), are so because of God’s prior action; they are “those whom God has called”.... For them the preaching of

Rapids: Baker, 1974), p. 107.

²⁷*Systematic Theology*, p. 693.

"Christ crucified" is effectual....²⁸

What the Apostle Paul refers to as being "the called" is another way of saying that they have "heard and learned from the Father."

Although this truth is often attacked as destroying man's freedom, this is a misunderstanding of the concept. No one is forced or coerced into salvation. Rather, God graciously illumines the mind so that a true understanding of the gospel takes hold, and, having seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, the heart turns to Him in saving faith (cf. 2 Cor 4:4–6). What this truth does demand is the recognition that salvation "does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy" (Rom 9:16). In Carson's words, "genuine coming to faith is never finally a matter of autonomous human decision."²⁹

God's Sovereignty in Keeping Them Eternally

The final aspect of God's sovereignty to be considered in relation to salvation is the matter of His preservation of genuine believers. The Lord Jesus Christ also taught that those given to Him by the Father will never be lost: "This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:39–40). The certainty of their eternal salvation is presented from both negative ("I lose nothing") and positive ("I Myself will raise him up") perspectives. The language leaves no room for exceptions: "all that He has given Me."

SUMMARY

Some views of God's sovereignty would never be accused of interfering with the believer's responsibility for evangelism and missions. This attack is usually reserved for those who believe that God's power is exercised with sovereignty over all things, and that God's grace is likewise bestowed according to His sovereign good pleasure. The tension cannot be felt properly without clarity about the extent of God's sovereign control. It is this writer's contention that: (1) God has eternally planned all things which come to pass; (2) God, before the world was created, chose some to salvation; (3) man is unable to respond in repentance and faith without an enabling work of God's grace;

²⁸Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 76–77.

²⁹*The Gospel According to John*, pp. 302–3.

(4) God only enables to come to Christ those whom He has given to His Son; (5) when God does draw sinners to Christ, He does so effectively; and (6) none of those who come to Christ will ever be lost, but will all be raised up on the last day.

AN APOLOGY REGARDING GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IN RELATION TO EVANGELISM AND MISSIONS

Those who reject the understanding of God's sovereignty outlined above often do so by challenging its practical ramifications. They argue that these beliefs destroy our motivation for evangelism and undercut God's program of reaching the lost with the gospel. While it must be conceded that some who believe these doctrines have failed to obey the command of God regarding evangelism, this is an indictment only of those individuals, not necessarily the doctrines themselves. Others who have held these beliefs have been urgent about evangelism and missions. Indeed, some who have rejected these doctrines have been cold and indifferent about evangelism and missions.

But since the charge is made so often, it should be answered. The refutation of this charge is found first in the answer to the question, "What are the biblical motivations for evangelistic zeal and missionary motivation?" Once we have identified these motivations, then we must ask a follow-up question, "Is anything inherent in the doctrine of God's sovereignty outlined above that diminishes these motivations?"

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND OUR EVANGELISTIC RESPONSIBILITY

The proper starting place for a biblical understanding of our motivation for evangelism and missions is found in God's command(s) to engage in both.

A Clearly Given Responsibility

God's people have been given a responsibility and have been commanded to carry out the Great Commission. That forms the bedrock of our motivation because it exalts God to first place in our lives, that is, we live for Him and demonstrate our love for Him through obedience (John 14:15).

In 2 Corinthians 5:17–20, the apostle Paul sets forth the case that those who have been reconciled *to* God have received *from* God a ministry of reconciliation. Notice carefully the argument that he makes in these verses:

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling

the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Some might be inclined to see "the ministry of reconciliation" (v. 18) as given only to the apostles, but the context seems to indicate differently.³⁰ Verse 18 presents the scope of reconciliation provided ("who reconciled us to Himself") as parallel to those who have received the ministry of reconciliation ("gave us the ministry of reconciliation"). The verse which precedes (v. 17) indicates that this ministry grows out of being new creations in Christ, and that is true of "anyone [who] is in Christ."

Also, Paul has already expanded his discussion of his own ministry to include all believers. The accountability he sets forth in vv. 10–11 is presented as being for all believers. It is based on that accountability that he persuades men, and the nature of this persuasion is clearly developed in the verses that follow. The kind of persuasion to which Paul is referring is clearly stated in v. 20: "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." Every believer is called to be an ambassador for Jesus Christ, urging the world to be reconciled to God.

A Clearly Revealed Accountability

In addition to the more general command to engage in evangelism, the Scriptures indicate that believers are accountable for witnessing to those with whom they have contact. In Acts 20:26 the Apostle Paul declares, "Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men." The same idea is present in Acts 18:6: "But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, 'Your blood be on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.'"

It seems that the truth of this text is either abused by those who deny God's sovereignty in salvation or ignored by those who affirm it. That it applies to this discussion can be seen in how commentators have approached it:

I am not to be charged with the guilt of your condemnation, as owing to my unfaithfulness. This does not mean that he set up a claim to absolute perfection; but that, in the matter under consideration, he had a conscience void of offense.... The word *blood* is used often in the sense of

³⁰For a contrary view, see Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 304–5.

death, of blood *shed*; and hence of the guilt or crime of putting one to death.... It here means that if they should die the second death; if they should be lost for ever, *he* would not be to blame. He had discharged his duty in faithful warning and teaching them; and now, if they were lost, the fault would be their own, not his.³¹

Like the trustworthy watchman in Ezek. 33:1–6, he had sounded the trumpet aloud so that all the province of Asia had heard: if there were any who paid no heed, their blood would be upon their own heads; Paul was free of responsibility for their doom.³²

He emphasizes that he has done his part faithfully, so that if anybody falls away, he will not be to blame. He boldly claims that no man's *blood* can be laid on him; for the metaphor see Ezk. 18:13; 33:1–6. The language of guilt for causing a person's death is here applied to the spiritual responsibility of the pastor for faithful presentation of the message that brings life. As the watchman who warns people faithfully of the coming of an enemy is not guilty if they choose to ignore the warning, so it was with Paul as a preacher of the gospel.³³

This plainly refers to that of the prophet (Ezek. Xxxiii. 6), where the blood of him that perishes by the sword of the enemy is said to be required at the hand of the unfaithful watchman that did not give warning; "You cannot say but I have given warning, and therefore no man's blood can be laid at my door." If a minister has approved himself faithful, he may have this rejoicing in himself, *I am pure from the blood of all men*, and ought to have this testimony from others.... He therefore leaves the blood of those that perish upon their own heads, because they had fair warning given them, but they would not take it.³⁴

While there is no basis in this text for excusing the lost from their own ultimate responsibility (e.g., "they would not be lost if you had told them"), it is also not legitimate to avoid the clear implication that believers will be held accountable for their failure to communicate the gospel.

All who stand condemned before God will be so because of their own rejection of His grace and refusal to worship Him (Rom 1:19–21; Acts 14:17). There will be no excuses for this. However, God's people will also be examined for their service to Christ, including their witness (2 Cor 5:10). Regarding this judgment, to be "innocent of the blood

³¹Albert Barnes, *Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), pp. 294–95.

³²F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), p. 415.

³³I. Howard. Marshall, *Acts*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980), p. 333.

³⁴Matthew Henry, *Acts to Revelation* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, n.d.), pp. 265–66.

of all men” means that this responsibility has been completely fulfilled—no one to whom Paul should have declared the gospel had been neglected.

In answer to those who claim that belief in God's sovereign plan for salvation destroys motivation for evangelism and missions, it must be asked, “Does anything about God's sovereignty diminish or eliminate *our obligation* to engage in evangelism actively and to be fervently committed to the Great Commission?” The answer is plainly no.

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND OUR EVANGELISTIC DESIRES

A second factor in evangelistic and missionary motivation focuses on the internal desire of believers. In addition to the biblical reality that believers *must* be involved in evangelism and missions, a heart that has been transformed by God's grace will *want* to be involved (Phil 2:13). Specifically, a growing believer will have desires both for God to be glorified through the gospel and for sinners to be rescued from condemnation.

A Godward Desire: The Pursuit of His Glory

Conversion radically turns the sinner from being an idol-worshipper into a servant of the true and living God (1 Thess 1:9). The false glory of dead idols is replaced by the true glory of the living God. The pursuit of this glory becomes the controlling center of life. It is not surprising, then, that Paul, in addressing how believers should relate to unbelievers, establishes the principle that “whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31).

A Desire for God's Glory to Be Proclaimed

In 2 Corinthians 4:3–6 Paul confronts the reality that many do not accept the gospel message. In context, he is making it clear that this rejection is not due to any flaws in the message or even in the messengers. If it is rejected, it is because the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving.

What is particularly important for our consideration is what the devil blinds the lost from seeing. Verse 4 says Satan “has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” So the devil keeps people trapped in condemnation by blocking their vision of the “glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” The heart of the gospel message, therefore, is the glory of Christ. Verse 6 further expands on God's glory in the gospel by describing the gospel message as “the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” The gospel that saves people is a gospel that reveals God's glory in Jesus Christ. If people don't accept the gospel, it is because they don't see God's glory in

it.

This truth is reinforced by the verse that comes between these two phrases. It is precisely because the gospel is “the gospel of the glory of Christ” and “the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” that Paul without hesitation claims, “we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord.” Contrary to many contemporary approaches to evangelism that tailor-make the gospel to fit the needs of the hearer, the biblical gospel focuses first on Christ, not the sinner. We preach Christ, not an eternal life insurance policy or keys to changing your life.

The driving impulse of evangelism and missions, then, is derived from the very message of the gospel, namely that God’s glory is revealed in Jesus Christ. Because they have accepted the truth of this message, in a very real sense, believers “cannot stop speaking about what [they] have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20).

A Desire for God’s Glory to Be Displayed

Growing out of Paul’s unapologetic confession that he is not sufficient for the task he has been given (2 Cor 2:14–17), but that God is sufficient (2 Cor 3:5–6), Paul reveals where his hope of “success” in the gospel ministry lies—the power and work of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 3:7–11):

But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory? For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses it. For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory.

The chief term that Paul uses to contrast the ministry of the law and that of the Spirit is glory (*δόξα* is used eight times in 5 verses; *δοξάζω* is used twice). Central to this is the statement of v. 8: “How will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory?” How is the ministry of the Spirit more glorious than the old covenant? Because the Spirit’s ministry has the power to give life to those under its administration, and that life-giving power is God’s power, so God receives the glory.

The fact that lost people are not only dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1), but actually hostile toward God (Rom 8:7), makes this powerful work of the Spirit absolutely necessary. Likewise, since the “natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them” (1 Cor 2:14), the Spirit must illumine the mind before the gospel will ever be understood and accepted. In the language of 2 Corinthians 3, the Spirit

must remove the veil that “lies over their heart” (v. 15).

All watered-down views of depravity produce a weakened view of God's saving grace and diminish the glory of the Spirit's work in bringing lost people to faith in Jesus Christ. Repentance and faith are God's gifts produced in hearts by the work of the Spirit (2 Tim 2:25; Phil 1:29; 2 Cor 3:14–18). Songwriter Daniel Whittle expressed the truth beautifully in “I Know Whom I Have Believed”:

I know not how this saving faith
To me He did impart,
Nor how believing in His Word,
Wrought peace within my heart.

I know not how the Spirit moves,
Convincing men of sin,
Revealing Jesus through the Word,
Creating faith in Him.

This work can only be accomplished by the Spirit's power, and the display of that power brings glory to God (cf. 2 Cor 4:7). Those who love God and relish His glory also long to see it displayed in the powerful work of the Spirit creating faith in Jesus Christ.

A Desire for God's Glory to Be Worshipped

In 2 Corinthians 4:15, Paul roots his missionary efforts in God's glory: “For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God.” This text presents a logical argument that concludes with the glory of God. In order to understand the argument properly, we must follow the steps Paul takes to get to that conclusion. He has just been discussing his willingness to be “delivered over to death for Jesus' sake” (v. 11) because he ministers from the basis of faith in God's promises, namely that “He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus” (v. 14). Because of that willingness, he keeps speaking for Christ (v. 13). On this basis, Paul confirms to them that “all things are for your sakes.” He willingly sacrifices himself to preach the gospel for the sake of these Corinthians (and the other Gentiles to whom he was commissioned as an apostle).

Immediately following the statement that “all things are for your sakes,” he introduces a purpose clause (“so that”) that tells why he does all things for their sakes.³⁵ In other words, the purpose of doing “all things for your sakes” is revealed in the second half of the verse. The first part of the verse deals with *what* Paul does (sacrifices himself in

³⁵Barnett, *Second Corinthians*, pp. 244–45.

ministering to the Gentiles), but the second part of the verse tells *why* Paul does it.

The answer why Paul does what he does is communicated in very complicated grammar, but the basic thrust is clear: the increase of grace makes for an increase of thanksgiving to the glory of God. Whether that grace is grace working in Paul (so that he can suffer and speak; KJV) or through Paul so that more and more people receive it (NASB, NIV), is a point of debate. The bottom line, however, is not a point of debate—the ultimate goal and driving purpose of his evangelism and missionary work is God’s glory!³⁶

Summary

A growing believer longs to proclaim God’s glory in the face of Jesus Christ, to see God’s glory displayed in the power of the Spirit converting sinners, and to see more and more people give God glory through thanksgiving. The product of these God-honoring desires is zeal to declare the gospel to people who are near and to take it those who are far off.

A Manward Desire: The Rescue of Sinners

When asked what the Great Commandment was, the Lord Jesus replied that it was to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt 22:37). To this He quickly added the second, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:39). The Lord’s parable of the Good Samaritan was given as an exposition of this truth. Confronted with the question, “Who is my neighbor” (Luke 10:29), the Lord told a story which concluded with the question, “Which one of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers’ hands?” (v. 36). The Lord used this parable to expand the command to love one’s neighbor far beyond the narrow scope envisioned by his questioner. By using the Samaritan as his central character and turning the question around (“whose neighbor am I?” versus “who is my neighbor?”), the Lord establishes the principle that genuine love for one’s neighbor cannot be applied selectively. We should be a neighbor to all who are in need of help, regardless of “who or what that person may be.”³⁷

Obedience to this second command demands that believers desire

³⁶John Piper is correct to argue that “If the pursuit of *God’s* glory is not ordered above the pursuit of *man’s* good in the affections of the heart and the priorities of the church, *man* will not be well served and *God* will not be duly honored” (*Let the Nations Be Glad!* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993], p. 12).

³⁷Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 312.

the salvation of the lost—desiring for your neighbor what you desire for yourself must include his or her salvation. A lack of desire for the lost to be saved is both inhuman and ungodly.

It Is Inhuman to Neglect the Salvation of the Lost

The Lord Jesus Christ set a pattern for us of how we ought to respond to the lost condition of humanity (Matt 9:36–38; cf. 23:37). Since He is the perfect example of human life in obedience to God's will and conformity to God's character, this pattern established what every human ought to be like. A human heart which is void of compassion at the condition of the lost reveals the sad and hardening effects of the Fall, not the image of God.

The Apostle Paul not only expressed his heart's desire for the salvation of lost people (Rom 10:1), but he also conducted his ministry in a way that demonstrated the sincerity of that statement through profound sacrifice and enormous exertion (2 Cor 4:15; 1 Thess 2:8; Acts 20:31, cf. 2 Cor 2:4). That this kind of life is expected of all believers is proven from Paul's command to be "imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). Paul took the pattern of Jesus Christ as normative, and he calls all believers to follow him in following it.

Further, believers have biblical responsibilities to love all people (1 Thess 3:12) and to do good to all men (Gal 6:10), one implication of which means that we would seek their greatest good—salvation. To be careless or negligent about the eternal welfare of others is inconsistent with, even contradictory to, manifesting biblical love toward them.

It Is Ungodly to Neglect the Salvation of the Lost

Also implicit in the pattern of Jesus Christ is the truth that genuine godliness demands compassion toward the lost and efforts to reach them with the gospel. It is obvious that disobedience regarding the Great Commission is ungodliness. But the ungodliness of neglecting the salvation of the lost runs deeper than the issue of obedience or disobedience. The essence of godliness means reflecting the character of God, and that means that we should respond to the lost in a way that reflects the character of God.

The Bible is clear that God does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek 18:23; 33:11). 1 Timothy 2:4 also states clearly that God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." Although some would take the meaning of "all men" to be "all kinds of men" (i.e., all men without distinction versus all men without exception),³⁸ such an interpretation is not the only view which is

³⁸E.g., George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids:

consistent with a strong position regarding divine election to personal salvation. A better approach, it seems, is to recognize in this text a genuine desire on God's part to save, but also to acknowledge, based on the other evidence of Scripture, that God does not determine to fulfill that desire regarding all men.³⁹ In other words, God desires that all men be saved, yet does not effect their salvation via a display of sovereign grace. Those who deny God's sovereignty over personal salvation find this view unacceptable,⁴⁰ but it does have the advantage of harmonizing both types of biblical texts without denying either. Paul is comfortable declaring both that God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" and "perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4; 2 Tim 2:25). If there are no limits on God's desire, then the word "perhaps" seems out of place.

So, if one takes the position that God genuinely desires the salvation of all men, it seems certain that since believers are to reflect the character of God, they should be earnest about desiring the salvation of the lost. To be careless regarding the impending doom of the lost is contrary to the character of God.

These factors all lead to another important question that confronts those who argue that belief in God's sovereignty over salvation destroys evangelistic and missionary motivation: "Is there anything about God's sovereignty that diminishes or eliminates our desire for God to be glorified in saving sinners and for sinners to be rescued from God's wrath?" The answer, again, is a resounding, "No."

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND GOD'S EVANGELISTIC PROGRAM

Another facet of this discussion focuses on how God's eternal plan to bring His chosen ones to salvation will be brought to completion. A central plank in the argument that belief in God's sovereignty over salvation destroys evangelistic and missionary motivation is that such a belief renders evangelism and missions unnecessary. In other words, it is argued that if God has chosen some to salvation and it is certain that they will be saved, then there is no need to witness or take the gospel to them. But this argument misses the mark simply because it ignores the fact that the Scriptures teach that God's sovereign purposes are

Eerdmans, 1992), p. 119.

³⁹For a thorough presentation of this view, see John Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God?" in *Still Sovereign*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), pp. 107–31.

⁴⁰E.g., I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), p. 427.

carried out through, not without, the preaching of the gospel.

The Reality of God's Program

Romans 10:13–17 is unmistakably clear about the essential nature of gospel preaching:

For “whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, “how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!” However, they did not all heed the good news; for Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our report?” So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.

The logic of Paul's argument has profound implications regarding both the destiny of the unevangelized and the responsibility of believers to proclaim the gospel. Only those who have heard the message can believe, and they will only hear if someone takes the message to them. John Piper effectively draws out the implications of this for those who have never heard the gospel:

Each succeeding question rules out an argument from those who say that there can be salvation without hearing the gospel of Jesus. First, “How are men to call upon him whom they have not believed?” shows that effective calling presupposes faith in the one called. This rules out the argument that one might call on God savingly without faith in Christ.

Second, “And how are they to believe in him whom they have never heard?” shows that faith presupposes hearing Christ in the message of the gospel. This rules out the argument that a person might have saving faith without really knowing or meeting Christ in the gospel.

Third, “And how are they to hear without a preacher?” shows that hearing Christ in the gospel presupposes a proclaimer of the gospel. This rules out the argument that one might somehow meet Christ or hear Christ without a messenger to tell the gospel.⁴¹

It is clear from this text that any claim that God will save apart from the gospel is contrary to the Scriptures. Schreiner supports this conclusion by tying this passage to Paul's earlier instruction in Romans 1:

We have already seen that Paul does not contemplate the possibility that people will be saved by responding positively to natural revelation (see the exegesis and exposition of 1:18–32). All people without exception reject the revelation of God heralded in nature and turn to idolatry. Romans 10:14–17 verifies this interpretation, for it excludes the idea that

⁴¹*Let the Nations Be Glad!* p. 155.

salvation can be obtained apart from the external hearing of the gospel. Those who call on the Lord in a saving way must believe in him, but this belief is not possible apart from the *hearing* of a message that someone preaches.... When one combines 1:18–32 and 10:14–17, it seems fair to conclude that people are not saved apart from the preaching of the gospel. It is this conviction that has driven the missionary impulse throughout history.⁴²

And it is precisely because of this truth that the argument under consideration needs to be turned completely around. Belief in God's sovereign choice of some to salvation does not eliminate the need for or urgency of evangelism; it actually increases both. Kuiper effectively draws this out:

Occasionally it is suggested that election makes evangelism superfluous. The question is asked: "If the decree of election is unchangeable and therefore renders the salvation of the elect completely certain, what need have they of the gospel? Will not the elect be saved whether or not they hear the gospel?"

The premise of that argumentation is altogether true. Divine election makes the salvation of the elect unalterably certain. But the conclusion drawn from the premise reveals a serious misunderstanding of the divine sovereignty as expressed in the decree of election.

While election is from everlasting, the truth may not be lost out of sight that its realization is a process in time. In that process numerous factors play a part. One of those factors is the evangel. And it is a most significant factor....

A most significant conclusion is now warranted. Instead of rendering evangelism superfluous, *election demands evangelism*. All of God's elect must be saved. Not one of them may perish. And the gospel is the means by which God bestows saving faith upon them. In fact, it is the only means which God employs to that end.⁴³

The divinely ordained program for calling out a people for His name's sake is the preaching of the gospel, and the reality of both its necessity and success compels participation in it. In fact, one outcome of God's gracious choice of believers to salvation is so they "may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called [them] out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9).

The Reason for God's Program

Gospel preaching is a necessary part of God's program for calling

⁴²Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), pp. 567–68.

⁴³R. B. Kuiper, *God-Centred Evangelism* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1966), pp. 37–39.

in His chosen ones because God's eternal plan encompasses both His goals and the means to accomplish them. "The absolute and unconditional plan of God also incorporates the *means* to the desired ends, the causes as well as the effects. Whatever conditions, causes, or other factors are necessary to fulfill the decreed event are themselves decreed. Both ends and means, or purposes and strategies, are comprehended in the decree."⁴⁴

2 Thessalonians 2:13–14 provides a clear biblical framework for understanding the relationship between divinely appointed ends and means.

But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.¹⁴ It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God's choice of these believers (the divinely-ordained end) was brought to fruition through the preaching of the gospel (the divinely-ordained means). Martin clarifies the connection well:

God's choice (*eilato*, v. 13) of the Thessalonians differs from his call (*ekalesen*) in v. 14 in that the former is a timeless event within the mind of God. The call, on the other hand, refers to the temporal event at which the apostle proclaimed the gospel, and the Thessalonians had the opportunity to respond to it (cf. Rom 10:14). There could be no ambiguity regarding the avenue by which the Thessalonians heard the call of God. They heard it through the gospel of the Lord Jesus (1:8) preached by Paul and his coworkers (cf. 1 Thess 1:5).⁴⁵

Packer is also helpful here:

The appointed *end* cannot be attained apart from the ordained *means*. God accomplishes His saving purposes through, not apart from, gospel preaching. This truth ought to be incentive toward aggressive evangelism because it stresses the crucial role that believers play in God's sovereign purpose to save. "We must realize, therefore, that when God sends us to evangelize, He sends us to act as vital links in the chain of His purpose for the salvation of His elect."⁴⁶

It should also be clear that the responsibility of believers lies in the

⁴⁴Rolland D. McCune, "Systematic Theology I" (class notes, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 1998), p. 192.

⁴⁵D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, NAC (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1995), p. 254.

⁴⁶J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1961), p. 98.

arena of *means*, not *ends*. God's sovereign plans cannot be used as an excuse for irresponsible, disobedient behavior. William Carey, in expressing the principles that would govern the mission work in India, captured the balance well:

We are sure that only those who are ordained to eternal life will believe, and that God alone can add to the church such as should be saved. Nevertheless we cannot but observe with admiration that Paul, the great champion for the glorious doctrines of free and sovereign grace, was the most conspicuous for his personal zeal in the work of persuading men to be reconciled to God.⁴⁷

So, in light of the accusation often made that belief in God's sovereignty is detrimental to evangelism and mission, it must be asked, "Is there anything about God's sovereignty that diminishes or eliminates the necessity of evangelism and missions?" Again, the answer is clearly, "No."

Summary

There is nothing about God's sovereignty over all things and over the gift of salvation that undercuts evangelistic and missionary motivation. The believer is obligated to obey God's commands regarding evangelism and missions. A growing believer will long to see God glorified and sinners converted by His grace. God's sovereign plan includes both the ends and the means to those ends, so evangelism and missionary activity are necessary. Or, to look at it from another perspective, evangelism and missions are both *important* (because of the believer's obligations and desires) and *urgent* (because of their necessity). This combination of the importance and urgency fuels the believer's motivation for evangelism and missions.

A POLEMIC REGARDING GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IN RELATION TO EVANGELISM AND MISSIONS

The purpose here is to turn the tables, so to speak, in this discussion. Rather than being detrimental to evangelism and missions, a settled conviction about God's sovereignty over all things, including the gift of salvation, is a powerful stimulus for the work of evangelism and missions. This stimulus is found in the benefits of believing both that God is sovereign in His rule over all things and in His granting of salvation.

⁴⁷Quoted by Iain H. Murray in *The Puritan Hope* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1971), p. 145.

THE BENEFITS OF BELIEVING THAT GOD IS SOVEREIGN OVER ALL THINGS

Acknowledging the biblical teaching regarding God's comprehensive control over all things produces confidence in believers as they face a wide range of challenges.

Confidence That God Can Answer Prayer

This belief produces confidence that God can answer important prayer requests that affect the success of our witness and missionary endeavors. Specifically, God's sovereign power enables Him (1) to move the wills of His people so that they go into the harvest (Matt 9:37–38; cf. Rom 10:15); (2) to protect His servants as they serve Him in the gospel (2 Thess 3:2; Rom 15:30–32); and (3) to cause the Word to spread rapidly and be glorified (2 Thess 3:1).

While those who deny God's complete sovereignty over all things would no doubt claim to pray confidently about these matters, retaining the concept of autonomous freewill removes the ground for confidence—God is certainly limited in what He can do in answer to each of these requests. He can work externally to move and position people, but He cannot effectively change the heart and will.⁴⁸ The net result is that the Great Commission is ultimately contingent on the decision of human will, and God cannot change that. Thankfully, the biblical portrait of God's sovereignty stands in stark contrast to this weak picture of divine power and control. As Bingham Hunter notes, "To be worth praying to, God has first of all got to have the power to do what we ask. Second, he must have the sovereignty over creation to do what he wants to do."⁴⁹

Confidence That God Can Control the Direction and Destiny of Nations

God's sovereignty over all things is the basis of missionary confidence that He can control the direction and destiny of nations, whether ruled by believers or pagans. Consider some biblical illustrations of this grand truth:

- And they observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the

⁴⁸E.g., Dick Eastman, *The Hour That Changes the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), p. 158.

⁴⁹*The God Who Hears* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity, 1986), p. 48.

work of the house of God, the God of Israel (Ezra 6:22).

- Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to adorn the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem (Ezra 7:27).
- The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes (Prov 21:1).
- But Sihon king of Heshbon was not willing for us to pass through his land; for the LORD your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, in order to deliver him into your hand, as he is today (Deut 2:30).

Why were believers able to turn to God in fervent prayer to tear down the Iron Curtain? It is because the Scriptures are clear that God is fully able to accomplish that which they ask. If He can use a pagan king to send His people back to the Promised Land, then He can turn the heart of the Communist Chinese leaders. On the other hand, those who argue vehemently for libertarian freewill build a wall around the "king's heart" that prevents God from turning it "wherever He wishes."

Confidence That God Can Overcome All Opposition to His Purposes

God's irresistible power is the source of confidence that He can overcome all obstacles to the fulfillment of His purposes. In this case, irresistible does not mean that it cannot be resisted, but that it cannot be resisted successfully. Again, consider the biblical portrait of this irresistible power:

- All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, 'What have You done?' (Dan 4:35).
- I know that You can do all things, And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted (Job 42:2).
- But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases (Ps 115:3).
- Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps (Ps 135:6).

Whatever God purposes to do, He can accomplish and no one can stand in His way. This was the confidence that sustained William Carey through his years of struggle and suffering for the sake of the gospel:

When I left England, my hope of India's conversion was very strong;

but amongst so many obstacles, it would die, unless upheld by God. Well, I have God, and His Word is true. Though the superstitions of the heathen were a thousand times stronger than they are, and the example of the Europeans a thousand times worse; though I were deserted by all and persecuted by all, yet my faith, fixed on that sure Word, would rise above all obstructions and overcome every trial. God's cause will triumph.⁵⁰

Those who reject God's complete sovereignty would claim to agree with Carey, but the sad consequence of exalting man's will to the place of virtual co-sovereign is that it destroys our confidence in the power of God to accomplish His purposes regardless of opposition.

Confidence That God Can Cause All Things to Work for Good

God's sovereign control over all things is the root of the believer's confidence that God can actively superintend all the details of life for His glory and His children's good. Sadly, the contemporary desire to squeeze God into a more relational mold actually reduces Him to a player alongside of humanity in the cosmic game. And as a player in their scheme, He does not control all things; He responds to the unfolding course of events in a way similar to humans. How can a God like that fulfill the promise of Scripture that He will cause "all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom 8:28)?

Those who deny God's specific sovereignty over all things must weaken the point of this text. John Sanders serves as example of this:

In my view, God does seek to bring good even out of tragedy, but there are no guarantees.... Considering the personal aspects of the divine-human relationship, though God works to bring good out of evil, God cannot *guarantee* that a greater good will arise out of each and every occurrence of evil.⁵¹

Given Sanders presupposition, he is correct to arrive at his conclusion. If God cannot control the actions of man, then the truth of this text is suspended on chance, not sovereignty. Thankfully, the Scriptures are clear that Sanders presupposition is incorrect. God can and does work through even the most sinful actions of man to accomplish His purposes as He did in the life of Joseph and in the crucifixion of His Son. This truth serves as a source of enormous comfort and strength for those who face hardship and persecution for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

⁵⁰Quoted by Iain H. Murray in *The Puritan Hope*, p. 140.

⁵¹*The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), p. 263.

THE BENEFITS OF BELIEVING THAT GOD IS SOVEREIGN OVER SALVATION

Firm conviction regarding the sovereignty of God's saving grace also produces confidence in believers as they engage in the tasks of evangelism and missions.

Confidence That God Will Open Doors for the Word

The powerful combination of God's purpose in election and the necessity of gospel proclamation produces confidence that God can and will open whatever doors need to be opened in order for the gospel to advance to its appointed end. This is the ground of Paul's request for prayer from the Colossian congregation: "Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word" (Col 4:3).

Confidence That God Controls the Harvest

The timing and size of the harvest is under the sovereign control of God. Embracing this truth allows believers to participate faithfully in the harvest according to the role that He assigns, free from man-made pressure to produce that which only God can do. Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman and the instruction He gave His disciples informs us that evangelism is a process that involves sowing and reaping. In light of the fast-approaching harvest of Samaritans, Jesus told His disciples, "I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored and you have entered into their labor" (John 4:38). Others had been involved in the labor, but were not divinely appointed to be involved in the reaping. But because the harvest is the Lord's, His people are only expected to be faithful for their assigned task. If God assigns the task of sowing, then sowing can be done in confidence that God will complete the harvest in His appointed time.

Confidence That God Gives Repentance and Faith

The sovereignty of God's grace means that God can work effectively in the hearts of sinners to draw them to Christ (John 6:44–45) by granting them repentance and faith (2 Tim 2:25–26; Phil 1:29). Sovereign grace means that God can work within the sinner to turn him from sin to Christ; He is not limited to external influence nor restricted in the amount of influence He can exert. Packer highlights the confidence which the evangelist or missionary can draw from God's sovereignty:

So far from making evangelism pointless, the sovereignty of God in grace is the one thing that prevents evangelism from being pointless. For it creates the possibility—indeed, the certainty—that evangelism will be fruitful. Apart from it, there is not even a possibility of evangelism being fruitful. Were it not for the sovereign grace of God, evangelism would be the most futile and useless enterprise that the world has ever seen, and there would be no more complete waste of time under the sun than to preach the Christian gospel.⁵²

For those who hold other views regarding God's sovereignty, these may seem like excessively strong claims. However, Piper, by turning the tables, drives home the seriousness of this issue:

People who really believe that man must have the ultimate power of self-determination, can't consistently pray that God would convert the unbelieving sinners. Why? Because if they pray for divine influence in a sinner's life they are either praying for a successful influence (which takes away the sinner's ultimate *self*-determination), or they are praying for an unsuccessful influence (which is not praying for *God* to convert the sinner). So either you give up praying for God to convert sinners or you give up ultimate human self-determination.⁵³

Confidence That God Will Call Out a People From the Nations

What is true of individuals, namely that God will save those He has chosen, extends to the ends of the earth. This confidence fuels the missionary enterprise. God told Paul, *prior to* his ministry in Corinth, that He had “many people in [that] city” (Acts 18:10). In a similar way, modern missionaries can follow the Lord's direction into the harvest fields of the world confident about the success of their efforts. The Lord Himself expressed this confidence about the mission of His disciples:

- All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out (John 6:37).
- I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd (John 10:16).
- You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you (John 15:16).

⁵²Packer, *Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God*, p. 106.

⁵³John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1991), p. 226.

- I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word (John 17:20).

The note of certainty in these texts should not be missed or minimized. The mission of Jesus Christ is not hanging on a thread of human contingency. The Lord was certain that His sheep would be gathered. What was the source of this confidence?

Jesus' confidence does not rest in the potential for a positive response among well-meaning people. Far from it: his confidence is in his Father to bring to pass the Father's redemptive purposes: *All that the Father gives me will come to me*. Jesus' confidence in the success of his mission is frankly predestinarian.⁵⁴

Before the Son left Heaven, He knew that His mission was sure to accomplish the objective of bringing in people "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Rev 5:9). This mission was never threatened in any way by the will of man because it was rooted in the sovereign purposes of God. As His ambassadors, believers ought to live with the same confident expectation that their witness for Christ and missionary endeavors will prosper under the good, all-powerful hand of God.

CONCLUSION

Biblically and *theologically*, there is no basis for eliminating evangelistic and missionary responsibility due to divine sovereignty. If believers choose to do so, they do it against the teaching of the Bible and the godly examples in it, not because of them. Furthermore, there is nothing in these doctrines that should diminish the proper motivations for evangelism and missions. *Practically*, since believers are not sovereign, they must concentrate on the responsibility side of this discussion while trusting God to use their obedience to accomplish His purposes. Evangelism and missions are critically important, so believers must engage in them. And these tasks are urgent, so faithful Christians must be diligent and zealous about them.

⁵⁴Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 290.