

Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God by J.I. Packer
A review by Tom Wood

In my own studies about the things of God, I have come to better understand and take comfort in the Sovereignty of God. While I didn't know what God's sovereignty referred to at first, I have slowly begun to see (from scripture) how God's hand is on everything that happens in this world; nothing happens outside of his allowing it to happen. While this does not mean that God is the author of sin (for such would be blasphemy), it does mean that for a season, He has chosen to allow evil and sin to exist in this world for His own purposes.

So, in thinking about sovereignty, many questions come to mind about how this truth impacts my daily life. Specifically, how do I resolve the tension on the one hand of being called by Christ to spread the good news of His offer of salvation to every person in the world, and on the other hand of knowing that God is in control of all things in this world. I might ask: "Why doesn't God miraculously drop a Bible out of the sky with an accompanying preacher into every tribe and tongue and nation of the world to spread the gospel, for surely God *could* do such a thing." That He *doesn't* is worth thinking about. And an excellent way of considering it further is with J.I. Packer's book *Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God*.

Two Truths?

A key theme of this book is the antimony (unresolvable tension) between God's sovereignty, man's responsibility, and the Christian's evangelistic duty. Packer says of his book that it "dispels the suspicion that faith in the absolute sovereignty of God hinders a full recognition and acceptance of evangelistic responsibility. On the contrary, only this faith [in sovereignty] can give Christians the strength that they need to fulfill their evangelistic task"

In approaching these two concepts of Sovereignty and Human Responsibility, Packer first reminds us that the Bible teaches both concepts. The fact that we cannot resolve how these two truths fit together does not give us license to therefore declare them as contradictory. We know that God's word is inerrant, and because both of these concepts are taught, we must hold to both of them. We do well to reflect on Isaiah 55:8: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD."

Further, Packer instructs us to take note of how Paul deals with this antimony in Romans 9:19-20. The context of this passage is about God's sovereign choice in election, and the question Paul is addressing is: "If God chooses who will be saved, then why are men found guilty when they don't accept Christ?" And Paul's answer to this is: "But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?'" In other words, Paul doesn't attempt to reveal *how* both truths co-exist, but rather that we have no right to question God in His revealing both through his written word. Packer concludes "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."

Won't a belief in Sovereignty undermine evangelism?

Some in the Church today think that too strong a belief in God's sovereignty will undermine evangelism. More specifically, that affirming the truth of the Doctrines of Grace (a.k.a. Calvinism) would result in people viewing their own evangelistic efforts as ultimately not mattering because God has already chosen who He will save. But Packer attacks this untruth head on, showing how it is actually sovereignty that is the rock upon which we stand in even attempting to spread the Gospel.

Packer asks us to consider how we pray for someone's conversion. "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." Rather, we will pray "that He will open the eyes of their understanding, soften their hard hearts, renew their natures, and move their wills to receive the Savior... When you pray for unconverted people, you do so on the assumption that it is in God's power to bring them to faith."

In actuality, there are (at least) two alternate poles of thinking, both of which miss the mark of true biblical evangelism. One temptation is to sidestep the sovereignty of God, thereby emphasizing human methods and persuasive techniques of presenting the gospel in clever and pertinent ways such that others will believe in it. The opposite temptation is an exclusive concern of divine sovereignty, wherein a person is ultimately absolved of all personal duties of spreading the gospel since it is God's choice who will be saved. But, both of these are unbiblical.

To counter the sovereignty side-stepper, Packer reminds us that our job is to present Christ, not to produce converts. If our job were to produce converts, we would have to devise a calculating and irresistible technique that would secure a decision for Christ every time. But following this line of thought, "the philosophy of our evangelism would become terrifyingly close to the philosophy of brainwashing."

To counter the human responsibility side-stepper, Packer reminds us that "Christ's command [to spread the gospel] means that we all should be devoting all our resources of ingenuity and enterprise to the task of making the gospel known in every possible way to every possible person... He who does not devote himself to evangelism in every way that he can is not, therefore, playing the part of a good and faithful servant of Jesus Christ."

Then what is the biblical model for evangelism?

Here, the book offers some really practical insights into understanding true evangelism.

- We are to declare a specific message. It is not evangelism to present Christ Jesus as a subject for detached critical and comparative study.
- We must present Christ as Savior ("I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me" [John 14:6 ESV]) and as King ("For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living" [Romans 14:9 ESV]).
- Evangelism is not simply a matter of teaching, and instructing, and imparting information to the mind... Evangelizing includes the endeavor to elicit a response to the truth taught.
- Evangelism means exhorting sinners to *accept* Christ Jesus as *their Savior*, recognizing that in the most final and far-reaching sense they are lost without Him.
- When we present the gospel, we must emphasize that the person hearing the message is responsible for their decision.
- The idea that a single evangelistic sermon, or a single serious conversation, ought to suffice for the conversion of anyone who is ever going to be converted is really silly.

And when we are disillusioned that our evangelistic efforts do not seem to be producing any fruit, we must remember a few things.

- The results of preaching depend, not on the wishes and intentions of men, but on the will of God Almighty.
- We must admit that we were silly ever to think that any evangelistic technique, however skillful, could of itself guarantee conversions.

- We must recognize that because man's ear is impervious to the word of God, it is no cause for surprise if at any time our evangelism fails to result in conversions.
- We must remember that the terms of our calling are that we should be faithful, not that we should be successful.
- We must learn to rest all our hopes of fruit in evangelism upon the omnipotent grace of God.
- You and I will never write off anyone as hopeless and beyond the reach of God if we believe in the sovereignty of His grace...This confidence should make us patient...If you are not willing thus to be patient, you need not expect that God will favor you by enabling you to win souls.

A double purpose in evangelism

One very helpful thing I took away from this book is that the great commission is not only for us to preach the good news to others, but also to pray. We are "not only to talk to men about God, but also to talk to God about men...God will make us pray before He blesses our labors in order that we may constantly learn afresh that we depend on God for everything." In other words, the act of evangelism is an act of trust in God's power and will have the effect of conforming our minds to knowing God more. In fact, my impotency of bringing people to Christ on my own power shows "God's desire to draw our dependence upon Him. We must recognize and confess our lack of power, and profess our complete trust in His power and to plead with Him that He will glorify His name."

We also must remember that "the question of whether or not one is evangelizing cannot be settled simply by asking whether one has had conversions." Rather, the way to evaluate our obedience to the call to evangelize is to "ask whether we are faithfully making known the gospel message." Ultimately, we must trust God when he declares "my word ...that goes out from my mouth...shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." [Isaiah 55:11 ESV]