

Sovereignty and Responsibility

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(Extracted from Scripture Truth Vol. 40, 1959-61, page 4.)

That God is sovereign and that man, though fallen, is a responsible creature, are two facts that stand out clearly in the Scriptures. It is when we study these two facts in their implications that we run into intellectual difficulties. It is easy to lay such stress on the one as almost completely to ignore the other. The two extremes are known as Hyper-Calvinism and Arminianism.

Hyper-Calvinism is that system of religious thought that sees little else in Scripture than God's sovereignty in election. The responsibility of man is so little thought of, if not denied, that he is reduced to a mere puppet. He is a plaything in the hand of fate. If he is elect, he **must** be saved, come what may; if he is not, he **must** be damned, and there's an end of it.

Arminianism, on the contrary, sees little else than the fact of man's responsibility, often to the total exclusion of God's sovereign and gracious work by His Spirit in the souls of men. Man is a free and unfettered being in the exercise of his own will: hence anything is lawful that will persuade him to exert the force of his will in the right direction.

The Hyper-Calvinistic spirit is fatal to all zeal and energy in the work of the Gospel. Those who possess it necessarily and logically decry such energy in every possible way. Men are spiritually dead: why preach to dead men? Why say, "Repent!" to men who can't repent? or "Believe!" to men who can't believe? Moreover, is not God able to look after His affairs? Does He require our busy interference in the saving of His elect? Supposing we compass sea and land in our zeal for souls, not one **more** than the elect will be saved; and if we fold our hands and do nothing, not one **less** than the elect will be saved. Masterly inactivity is then the only possible policy, and all the energy of the servants of the Lord is only so much unprofitable waste of time and breath.

One wonders sometimes why this kind of argument seems to be only used against evangelistic effort. If valid at all, it is just as valid against all forms of Christian service. Is not God able to care for the souls of His elect without our endeavours to edify them? Will not the sovereign work of the Spirit in building up their souls progress without the labours of pastors and teachers, or such small efforts as producing this magazine? The exponents of such ideas seem blind to the fact that they are cutting the ground from beneath their own feet.

At the present time the Arminian extreme is perhaps the more frequently held by truly Christian people. They feel the need of sinners and rejoice in the glad tidings of forgiveness through the crucified and risen Saviour. The great question now is, how best to get at sinners and persuade them into a definite act of their own will, in accepting Christ and choosing life. The more in earnest such Christians are, the greater the danger of their using questionable or even unscriptural methods. The great end which they feel they must reach, is considered by them to sanctify the means employed.

The practical results of this are very different from those of the other extreme. There all is stagnation: here all is movement and apparent success at the beginning. We are concerned however with the **ultimate** results. At the close of a large mission in London, a good many years ago, the pastor of a large chapel had over 50 names given to him of people who professed conversion. The pastor was a warm-hearted, evangelical man, but a year or so after he sadly confessed he could only regard one as truly converted. Thank God for the one! But how sad that nearly fifty should be led on to a wrong road in order to direct one into the right.

Let us by the grace of God maintain firmly **both** these great facts — God is sovereign in His gracious actings: man, though fallen, is a responsible creature and addressed as such. The truth of Divine sovereignty is plainly stated in Scripture. Read such passages as John 6: 37-44; Romans 9: 10-24; Ephesians 1: 4; 1 Peter 1: 2. Equally plain is man's responsibility. Read such passages as John 3: 16-18; Romans 2: 6-16; 1 Peter 4: 5-6. Let us then accept both, even if as yet we do not see far enough to discern exactly how they fit in with each other.

We may however discern this that man's will, if he is left to himself **never** turns toward God. The fall has given it a permanent twist away from Him. This is definitely stated in Romans 3: 10-12. It is stated first of all that "there is NONE righteous;" that is, none "right with God." Yes, we might say, that is true, but surely some people are more sincere and understanding than others, and so these get converted. Not so, for there is "NONE that understandeth." This makes man's plight much worse — nobody right, and nobody understands their desperate position. But again we might say, Yes, but surely some will have an innate sense — a kind of intuition — that they need God, and so begin to seek after Him. But once more, not so, for, "there is NONE that seeketh after God."

This word, "NONE," thrice repeated, closes every avenue of deliverance if man is just left to himself. God must intervene. In other words, God must exercise His sovereign action on a man's behalf. He must work by His Spirit in the hearts of men' if any are to seek after Him and His salvation. This He does, as pleases Him, when the Gospel is faithfully preached, since it pleases God, "by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe (1 Cor. 1: 21).

If any would say to us, If God in His electing mercy is pleased to save this one and that one, why should He not elect and save all? — we have no answer to give. What lies behind His decisions is not revealed to us, who are but His creatures; but He has revealed Himself to us in Christ, and so we are sure that what He decides is right, and ultimately all will see how right it has been.

Instead of seeking to probe into the secret of the Divine decisions and acts, which are beyond us, let us more diligently and fervently publish abroad the Gospel, since He **has** revealed that through **this** He is pleased to save those that **believe**, as the result of the work of the Spirit of God in their hearts.