

A Defense of God's Sovereignty

(By Zack M. Guess)

Introduction

Recently a sister in our congregation has been given some material that blatantly denies the sovereignty of God in salvation. The people who have written this profess to be Christians and I have no doubt that at least some of them are. However, they have a very distorted idea of the sovereignty, nature, and purposes of God. Some of the material at least borders on blasphemy, if not being outright guilty of it. I have found my "spiritual blood" being stirred and I cannot keep silent. I feel much as Paul did at Athens, where it is written of him in Acts 17:16, "Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry." In Christian circles today many are guilty of making idols of the so-called "free will" of man and of humanistic ideas of the "fairness" of God. God must not violate our "free will," and He absolutely must behave Himself according to our ideas of what constitutes fairness.

Fundamental Difference

There is a fundamental distinction in the ways in which those who unabashedly believe in God's absolute sovereignty differ from those who presuppose what might be accurately called a "user friendly" God. The well-known contemporary theologian, J. I. Packer, clearly shows the difference in his excellent Introductory Essay to *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* by John Owen. Here we will give a few revealing excerpts from this essay.

Without realizing it, we have during the past century bartered that gospel for a substitute product which, though it looks similar enough in points of detail, is as a whole a decidedly different thing...The new gospel conspicuously fails to produce deep reverence, deep repentance, deep humility, a spirit of worship, a concern for the church. Why? We should suggest that the reason lies in its own character and content. It fails to make men God-centered in their thoughts and God-fearing in their hearts because this is not primarily what it is trying to do. One way of stating the difference between it and the old gospel is to say that it is too exclusively concerned to be "helpful" to man-to bring peace, comfort, happiness, satisfaction-and too little concerned to glorify God...[The old gospel] was always and essentially a proclamation of Divine sovereignty in mercy and judgment, a summons to bow down and worship the mighty Lord on whom man depends for all good, both in nature and in grace. Its centre of reference was unambiguously God. But in the new gospel the centre of reference is man...Thus, we appeal to men as if they all had the ability to receive Christ at any time; we speak of His redeeming work as if he had done no more by dying than make it possible for us to save ourselves by believing; we speak of God's love as if it were no more than a general willingness to receive any who will turn and trust; and we depict the Father and the Son, not as sovereignly active in drawing sinners to themselves, but as waiting in quiet impotence "at the door of our hearts" for us to let them in...The Bible is against us when we preach in this way; and the fact that such preaching has become almost standard practice among us only shows how urgent it is that we should review this matter.^{i[i]}

So there we have the fundamental difference in how professed Christians think about God. There is the **God-centered** approach, which produces reverence and Godly fear, and there is the **man-centered** approach that tends to bring God down to our human level of fairness. To paraphrase Patrick Henry, "I know not what course others may take. But as for me I will worship the sovereign God Who does not give account of His affairs to His puny creatures!"

Some Preliminary Considerations

Dead In Sin

Before we begin to examine the writings in question, let us look at some basic principles. One of the mistakes that people always make when they make salvation between man and God a cooperative endeavor is to have a **basic misunderstanding** of what it means to be dead in trespasses and sins.^{iii[iii]} The Bible teaches that until God gives spiritual life as a sovereign act of His Holy Spirit the sinner is spiritually dead. While giving lip service to this fact, those who say a man must do something to obtain spiritual life teach that he is sick-desperately sick perhaps- but still just sick. Joseph Bianchi makes this clear in *God Chose to Save*. He speaks of two men in a room. One has had his leg cut off with a chain saw. The other has died of a heart attack. They are both told to go to the other side of the room and to come back. The man with the amputated limb has a terrible time of it. He falls on his face, but finally learns to hop on one leg and returns to his side of the room terribly out of breath. But he made it! The man who had the heart attack, however, is still in his coffin.^{iii[iii]} Chapter Seven in Bianchi's book is revealing titled "When You're Dead You're Dead!" When an individual can get a grasp of this very simple and basic truth he can begin to truly glorify the God of His salvation Who "saved a wretch like me."

God's Love

The one who teaches that God is not sovereign in salvation says that God loves each member of the human race, without exception. Yet he freely admits that many of these humans that God loves are going to perish eternally under the wrath of God. There are several inconsistencies in this position. According to this hypothesis either God's love turns to hatred or God loves those who are eternally damned as much as He does those who will enjoy eternal bliss. Let us examine each of these propositions.

What about God's love turning to hatred? This is an impossibility for those who believe the Bible to be the inspired word of God. According to Jeremiah 31:3, "The LORD hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee." One of the attributes of God is His **immutability**. God does not change. This is made plain in several Scriptures. He says in Malachi 3:6, "For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed." The New Testament confirms this in James 1:17, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning." God does not change; therefore His attributes do not change. Love is one of the attributes of God. The apostle makes this clear in 1 John 4:16, "And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. **God is love**; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him."

Thus it is impossible for God's eternal love to turn to hatred.

Cain and Abel? Jacob and Esau? Paul and Judas?

Having established the fact that God's love does not turn to hatred, let us now consider the thesis that God loves those who will spend an eternity in hell as much as He loves those who will forever be with Him in eternal bliss.

This proposition is absurd on the face of it. It flies in the face of reason and revelation to think that God loves Cain just as much as He does Abel. It does not make sense to think that God did as much for Cain as He did for Abel. If that is truly the case then Abel's part in his salvation was just as important as was God's. That is really a blasphemous concept. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. According to Arminianism God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each did as much as possible for the salvation of sinners. However, all this is to no avail without the cooperation of the sinner. God did as much for those in hell as He did for those in heaven. The sinner is the one who made the difference.

God's word plainly says that He loved Jacob, but that He hated Esau. He did this even before they had an existence. But according to consistent Arminianism, God loved Esau just as much as He did Jacob and made equal provisions for their salvation. Esau may be in hell but God still loves him! This is simply unscriptural and absurd.

For one more example, according to Arminianism God loved Judas as much as He did Paul. Somehow, Paul "accepted Christ as his personal Savior" while Judas did not. Christ died for the sins of Judas, but somehow this payment for sin was not effectual because Judas did not do his part. Friends, this is simply absurd.

Simplicity

All this sounds very simple. That is because it is simple! Satan likes to complicate things so that truth is obscured. Paul warned about this. He said in 2 Corinthians 11:3, "But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ."

My friends, the only thing that makes sense in salvation is to give God **all** the credit and **all** the glory. The simple truth is that God loves a great many people, but He does not love all. If He did he would have saved them all. God is not going to be eternally wringing His hands and agonizing about many whom He passionately loves but who are suffering the pains of the damned.

That is absurd!

Human Pride

The doctrines of grace have always been controversial. In fact Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, anticipated and met objections to God's good pleasure in salvation more than 2000 years ago. He didn't really argue about it. He simply appealed to the sovereign right of the Creator, Judge, and Sustainer of all creatures and things to do what He would with those He had created. It would be well for all of us to consider the sobering words the apostle penned in Romans 9:20,21, "Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?" We live in an irreverent age when men think nothing of questioning and even lashing out against God when He doesn't meet their expectations of how they think He should behave.

The doctrines of grace cut all the ground from under human pride. Most professed Christians do not mind giving God some credit for salvation. They are usually glad to give Him most of the credit. However, many of them just must reserve a little credit for themselves. Sovereign grace gives God 100% of the praise for salvation. There will be no place in heaven for praise for human “soul winners.” The song in heaven is the same we should be singing on earth. That song is found in Revelation 5:9, “And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation...” There is not one iota of praise here for anyone except the Lord Jesus Christ.

Is The Tulip Position Scriptural?

It is now time to consider the material the sister came in contact with from those who deny the sovereignty of God in salvation. They begin with an attack on the acronym, **TULIP**. This is merely a convenient device to describe the grace of God in salvation. The “T” stands for **Total Depravity**, the scriptural doctrine that teaches that mankind, who fell in Adam in the Garden of Eden, is completely dead in trespasses and sins before God gives him spiritual life. In this condition the sinner is absolutely unable to do **one single thing** to contribute to his salvation. He is just as dead and unable spiritually as a human corpse is dead and unable naturally. To raise a man from physical death is a miracle to which he contributes nothing. The same principle holds true in the spiritual realm.^{iv[iv]}

The “U” stands for **Unconditional Election**. This simply teaches that God, before the foundation of the world, chose those from the human race whom he would save and left the rest in their sins. He did this out of His sovereign good pleasure. This election was not based on anything the sinner would do or not do but simply on the sovereign good pleasure of God.^{v[v]}

The “L” stands for **Limited Atonement**. This Biblical doctrine is also referred to as **Particular Redemption**. This teaches that Christ was completely successful in eradicating all the sins of all those He died for. He was not disappointed in any way in His great work of salvation. He did not provide provisional salvation that would be made complete only with the cooperation of those for whom He died. His work was actually saving, not potentially so. He purposely limited the atonement to the ones His Father had chosen before the foundation of the world. His redemptive work was always successful on behalf of His particular people who are known in Scripture by such names as “the elect,” “my sheep,” “His people,” and by other designations.^{vi[vi]}

The “I” stands for **Irresistible Grace**. This simply means that when God intends to apply His salvation to an individual by actually giving him spiritual life, He is always successful. This work, which is sometimes referred to as “regeneration” or “the new birth,” is accomplished by irresistible power. This does not mean that God saves people, kicking and screaming, against their wills. When He saves them He changes their wills. Scripturally, it takes as much power to give an individual spiritual life, as it did to create

the world or to raise an individual from the dead. A failure to recognize this is what gives us the phenomenon of “easy believism.” All a sinner has to do is to exercise his “free will” and invite Christ to come into his heart. This is impossible for one who is dead in sin. A man dead in sin is not only unable to respond favorably in a spiritual way, but he has an entrenched and radical bias against true religion.^{vii[vii]}

The “P” stands for **Preservation** of the saints. This teaches that once a person is saved he cannot lose his salvation. The same God, who did the saving to begin with, maintains that spiritual life in the child of God. A saint may temporarily fall out of **fellowship** with God, but can never sever his **relationship** with God.^{viii[viii]}

Some of the Accusations

Taking Scriptures Out of Context of Misapplying Them (John 15: 16)

Those who believe in the sovereignty of God and of giving Him all credit for salvation and of declaring that He has never failed in His intentions are accused of taking Scriptures out of context or of misapplying them. One of these accusations is based on John 15:16, “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you.” It is alleged that those who believe in the sovereignty of God use this verse to teach the doctrine of election, but that this verse is related to service. **Answer:** It is certainly true that this passage does relate to service. This verse is not talking about eternal election to salvation. There are at least three types of election taught in the Scriptures. One is the election of nations to fulfill certain functions. The most prominent example of this is Israel.^{ix[ix]} Another is the election or choice of one to an **office**. That is the one under consideration here. These men were chosen by God to fill the office of apostle. This even pertained to Judas, as can be seen in John 6: 70, 71. Judas filled the office of an apostle. He was chosen to this office by God. However, Judas was not chosen for salvation or he would have been saved. The third kind of election and the most prominent in Scripture is the election of individuals to salvation. The criticism directed here against those who give all glory to God is therefore invalid and is made because of a misunderstanding of the various kinds of election plainly taught in the Holy Scriptures.

2 Timothy 2: 9, 10

Another objection against those who attribute all glory to the always-successful Savior is based on 2 Timothy 2:9, 10, “Wherein I suffer trouble, as an evil doer, even unto bonds; but the word of God is not bound. Therefore I endure all things for the elect’s sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.” The objection is that if the elect are going to be saved anyway, why should anyone put forth great effort to preach the gospel? **Answer:** We should preach the gospel simply because God has told us to. This is a simple matter of obedience. If a person responds favorably to the gospel this is evidence that he was elected to salvation before the world began. Paul referred to this in 1 Thessalonians 1:4,5, “Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God. For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy

Ghost, and in much assurance...” The word of God coming to them in power did not make them elect, but was an evidence of their election. What the gospel does is not to bring life to the elect; it simply reveals the spiritual life that has been implanted in the heart by the Holy Spirit in regeneration. A Scripture that makes this plain is 2 Timothy 1:10, “But is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel...” Life and immortality are not given by the gospel, but are brought to light or revealed. In fact the word translated “obtain” in 2 Tim. 2: 10 (*tugchanoo* in the Greek) is translated “enjoy” in Acts 24: 3. Paul wanted the elect to come to a knowledge of their God-given salvation so that they could enjoy it and to glorify Him for it.

2 Peter 1: 10

Still another Scripture used by those who deny God’s eternal election of His children to obtain salvation is 2 Peter 1:10, “Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall...” The objection is “how can you make it sure? You either have it or you don’t.” **Answer:** The clear answer to this objection is to examine the context and to see what is under consideration. Peter is here talking to people who were already born again. They had “obtained like precious faith.” The word translated “obtained” here is a very interesting one. It is the word *lanchano*. It means, “to obtain by lot.”^{x[x]} According to this word “the attainment is not by one’s own effort or as a result of one’s exertions, but is like ripe fruit falling into one’s lap.”^{xi[xi]} These people had been saved according to God’s electing grace. Their salvation was secure. As is said in Romans 8:33, “Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth.” What is under consideration here is not the obtaining of salvation. What is being discussed here is the **assurance of salvation**. It is not possible for one to lose salvation after it been obtained. A true child of God can never fall out of relationship with God, but he can fall out of fellowship with God. If I have children, they will always be my children. The relationship is permanent. However, by their disobedience, my children can fall out of fellowship with me.

This can also happen to a child of God. I cannot lose my salvation, but by disobeying God, I can lose the assurance of my salvation. Peter is here telling the saints to make their calling and election sure to **themselves** and to **others**, not to God. This is made plain by the context. It is also made plain by the New Testament Greek. The word translated “make” is a present middle infinitive. In English we have an active voice and a passive voice. In the active voice the subject is acting, such as in the sentence, “Tom threw the ball.” In the passive voice the subject is being acted upon, as in the sentence, “The ball was thrown.” In the Greek there is also a middle voice. In it the subject is acting but also participating in the results of the action. A good example would be, “He is washing himself.” In this middle infinitive the idea is to “make your calling and election sure to yourself.” The more obedient we are to God the more He is going to give us the assurance that we have eternal life and are therefore among the elect.

^{i[i]} Introductory Essay to 1959 Banner of Truth reprint of *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, by John Owen, pp. 1-2.

ⁱⁱ^[iii] I am sure that even those who teach this feel uncomfortable in actually saying that salvation is a cooperative endeavor between God and man. Unfortunately, however, this is exactly what they teach. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. If it breaks at that weak link, all the work of the strong links is to no avail. Therefore, if salvation is achieved as taught by these people, the decision of the sinner is just as important as is the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They may each do their part, but if the sinner refuses to cooperate and properly exercise his “free will,” all the work of the Triune God is of none effect!

ⁱⁱⁱ^[iii] Joseph M. Bianchi, *God Chose to Save*, (Amityville: Calvary Press, 2001), p. 13.

^{iv}^[iv] Some Scriptures which support this are Gen. 2: 16, 17; Rom. 5: 12; 1 Cor. 2: 14; Eph. 2: 1; Rom. 8: 7, 8, and many others.

^v^[v] Some Scriptures which support this are Luke 18: 7; Eph. 1: 4; Rom. 8: 33; Col. 3: 12; 1 Thess. 1: 4, and many others.

^{vi}^[vi] Some Scriptures which support this are Matt. 1: 21; Matt. 20: 28; John 10: 11; Heb. 9: 12; 1 Pet. 1: 18, 19, and many others.

^{vii}^[vii] Some Scriptures which support this are Ps. 110: 3; John 3: 8; John 5: 25; 2 Cor. 4: 6; 1 Pet. 1: 21, and many others.

^{viii}^[viii] Some Scriptures which support this are John 10: 27-30; Rom. 8: 38, 39; Phil. 1: 6; 1 Pet. 1: 5; Jude 24, and many others.

^{ix}^[ix] See Deut. 7: 6-8.

^x^[x] W. E. Vine, *The Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Fleming H. Revell Co., (1966 Reprint), Vol. 3, p. 126.

^{xi}^[xi] Edited by Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., (1969 Reprint), Vol. 4, p. 1.