

“Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: How Should Southern Baptists Respond
To This Divine Mystery?”

By

Daniel L. Akin

Few issues are more likely to ignite a lively debate than a discussion of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Recent years have witnessed a renewed interest of this subject in Southern Baptist life, and for this we should be grateful. The Conservative Resurgence which began in 1979 was about the authority and teachings of the Bible. Those who believe the Bible to be the inerrant and infallible Word of God will take its doctrines seriously. Issues like predestination and election, freewill and human responsibility, will naturally require our careful study. Thankfully our theological discussions are not those of other denominations in our day. Issues like the deity of Christ, the exclusivity of the gospel, open theism, abortion and homosexuality are settled for Southern Baptists because of our commitment to the clear teachings of Scripture.

However, some doctrines of the Bible are more complex. There is often a mystery and tension to what we find when we examine all that the Bible says on the subject. This is clearly the case when it comes to understanding God’s sovereignty and human responsibility in salvation. Unfortunately there is more heat than light in many instances with shrill voices and unhealthy rhetoric getting too much attention. On one side you hear people saying that God hates the non-elect and damns babies to hell. They say that Jesus was a Calvinist and that Calvinism is the gospel. On the other side you hear voices stating that Calvinism is heresy, and that Calvinists do not believe in missions and

evangelism. Some even suggest that the Southern Baptist Convention could split over this issue, though I am convinced this will not happen.

I believe we need to tone down the rhetoric. We need to seek biblical balance, theological sanity and ministerial integrity in the midst of this discussion. Let me attempt to set the playing field for this important issue, and then make some theological and practical suggestions as we work together for the glory of God and the cause of Christ.

A Look At Calvinism

The issue that is being debated today almost always revolves around the idea of Calvinism. To some this is a theological land mine to be avoided at all cost, even if they are not sure what it means. For others it signals a recovery of Biblical truth growing out of the Reformation of the 16th century and its emphasis on the great *solas*: Scripture alone, Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, for the glory of God alone. John Calvin (1509-64) was the great theologian of the Reformation. An outstanding biblical scholar, he heralded the theology of both Paul and Augustine (354-430). Like Martin Luther (1483-1546), he emphasized the sovereignty of God, the sinfulness of man and the necessity of grace for salvation.

Later in the 17th century, followers of Calvin would systematize his theology and, in my judgment, go beyond what Calvin himself taught. This system would be codified through the now famous acrostic TULIP. Let me provide a brief description and comment on each of the 5 points of the Calvinistic system.

Total Depravity – Man is born with a nature bent toward sin. Every aspect of man's being is infected with the disease of sin so that he cannot save himself, neither can he move toward God without the initiating and enabling grace of God. Man is not as bad as

he could possibly be, but he is radically depraved. Most Baptists would agree on this point, at least in some measure. It is hard to deny it in light of Romans 3:9-20 and Ephesians 2:1-3.

Unconditional Election – God in grace and mercy has chosen certain persons for salvation. This decision is not based on human merit or foreseen faith, but in the goodness and providence of God’s own will and purposes. I would add, however, that the electing purpose of God is somehow accomplished without destroying human freewill and responsibility. The French theologian Moise Amyraut (1596-1664) referred to this as God’s secret or hidden decree. I personally find great wisdom in this humble admission. No one is saved apart from God’s plan, and yet anyone who repents and trusts Christ will be saved. There is tension in this position, but a tension we should accept and maintain. John 6:37-47 is helpful at this point.

Limited Atonement – This is an unfortunate phrase, with most 5-point Calvinists preferring the term “particular redemption.” This point affirms that it was the intent of the atoning work of Christ to provide and purchase salvation for the elect. Thus the work of Christ is limited to the elect, and His atonement was made for a particular people (e.g. His sheep, the Church, His Bride). This is a real point of contention for many, and I confess that I cannot embrace this teaching in its classic form. However, let me make a crucial observation that may foster some rapprochement. All Bible-believers limit the atonement in some way. To not do so is to advocate Universalism, the view that eventually everyone will be saved. My understanding of the Bible is that the limitation of the atonement is in its application, not its provision. In other words I believe that in His death on the cross Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world (John 3:16; 1 Tim. 2:4-6;

4:10; 2 Pet. 2:1; 1 John 2:1-2; 4:9-10) making a universal provision. However, the application is limited to those who receive the free gift of salvation offered to them by their personal faith in Christ. One can see then that all evangelicals limit the atonement in some sense, but do so in different ways and at different places.

Irresistible Grace – Another unfortunate choice of words, the phrase “effectual calling” is much better. This doctrine asserts that those who are predestined to be saved are called to salvation (Rom. 8:30) effectually or effectively. They are not forced to come but are set free to come and they do so willingly. Timothy George strikes the balance of this teaching with human responsibility when he writes, “God created human beings with free moral agency, and He does not violate this even in the supernatural work of regeneration. Christ does not rudely bludgeon His way into the human heart. He does not abrogate our creaturely freedom. No, he beckons and woos, He pleads and pursues, He waits and wins” (*Amazing Grace*, 74).

Perseverance of the Saints – Those God saves He protects and preserves in their salvation. Baptists have historically referred to this as the doctrine of “eternal security”, or in popular terminology as “once saved, always saved.” This is one point of Calvinism that almost all Baptists affirm. Sometimes misunderstood and falsely caricatured by those rejecting this doctrine, perseverance of the saints does not teach one can live any way they want and take advantage of God’s grace. Rather, because of the greatness of the gift of our salvation, true believers will be grieved when they sin and they will pursue a life that is pleasing to the God whom they love and who keeps them safely in His hand (John 10:27-29).

This is a summary of 5 point Calvinism or what its advocates call “the Doctrines of Grace.” Though it is not as popular among Southern Baptists as it was in the past, there has been a rise in interest in its teachings. And, one should honestly acknowledge many wonderful and significant Baptists in the past followed these doctrines. This includes men like William Carey, Luther Rice, Adoniram Judson, Charles Spurgeon, John L. Dagg, Basil Manly Jr. and James Boyce. Andrew Fuller, John Broadus and B. H. Carroll would also have considered themselves Calvinists, though both would have affirmed only four of the five points. They did not advocate particular redemption.

How then should Southern Baptists respond to this issue at the dawn of the 21st century? As people of the book who rejoice in a remarkable history, how might we move forward together in the days ahead?

Finding Biblical Balance: Theological and Practical Considerations

Grasping the magnitude of this issue is a daunting task for finite sinful humans. A good dose of humility is certainly in order. As we attempt to understand both the Bible’s teaching and work with those with whom we may not see eye to eye, what are some theological and practical principles that can guide us? I would make six suggestions.

- 1) In your doctrine of salvation, start with God and not man. The Bible affirms that “Salvation is from the Lord” (Jonah 2:9) and “by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift – not from works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). We should be God-centered in all of our theology, especially the doctrine of salvation. The Bible teaches that salvation is God’s work. He is the author and finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:2). He takes the initiative. He is the true Seeker!

2) Affirm the truth both of God's sovereignty and human freewill. "The Abstract of Principles" was the founding confession for the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. It was penned by Basil Manly Jr. in 1859. Manly was a Calvinist, and yet Article IV on Providence reveals a healthy, theological balance in our Baptist forefather. Manly wrote,

God from eternity decrees or permits all things that come to pass, and perpetually upholds, directs and governs all creatures and all events; yet so as not in any wise to be author or approver of sin nor to destroy *the freewill and responsibility* of intelligent creatures (emphasis mine).

The Bible teaches that God predestines and elects persons to salvation but that He does so in such a way as to do no violence to their freewill and responsibility to repent from sin and believe the gospel. Is there a tension here? Yes. Is there divine mystery?

Absolutely! I am convinced this is what Paul felt when, at the end of his magnificent treatment of this subject in Romans 9-11, he concludes with a doxology of praise and says, "Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments and untraceable His ways"! (Rom. 11:33). If you find it a challenge to fathom the depths of this doctrine then you are in good company!

3) Recognize that extreme positions on either side of the issue are biblically unbalanced, theologically unhealthy and practically undesirable. Biblically we affirm the truth of all of God's Word. Words like called, chosen, election, foreknowledge and predestination are in Holy Scripture. We should embrace them, examine them and seek to understand them. Words like believe, evangelist, go, preach, receive and

repent are also in the Bible. Biblical balance requires that we embrace and affirm these as well.

Theologically we cannot be seduced into living in a theological ghetto that may espouse a nice neat doctrinal system, but that does so at the expense of a wholesome and comprehensive theology. Statements such as, “election works like this: God voted for you. The devil voted against you. And you cast the deciding vote” must be set aside as an inaccurate reflection of the biblical revelation. On the other hand, attempting to construct a doctrine of double predestination wherein God elects some to damnation, hates the lost, and consigns non-elect infants to the fires of hell is equally irresponsible and lacking in biblical support.

Practically we must not become manipulative and gimmicky in our presentation of the gospel as if the conversion of the lost depends on us. Neither should we be lulled into an antipathy toward personal evangelism and global missions. Any theology that does not result in a “hot heart” for the souls of lost persons is a theology not worth having. I fear that some extreme forms of Calvinism have so warped the mind and frozen the heart of its advocates that if they saw a person screaming to the top of their lungs “what must I do to be saved?”, they would hesitate or even neglect sharing the gospel for fear of somehow interfering with the work of the Holy Spirit.

If the initials J.C. bring first to your mind the name John Calvin rather than Jesus Christ, and you fancy yourself more of an evangelist for Calvinism than Christ, then this latter word of concern is particularly for you. Never forget that the greatest theologian who ever lived was also the greatest missionary/evangelist who whoever lived. His name is Paul.

- 4) Act with personal integrity in your ministry when it comes to this issue. Put your theological cards on the table in plain view for all to see, and do not go into a church under a cloak of deception or dishonesty. If you do, you will more than likely split a church, wound the body of Christ, damage the ministry God has given you, and leave a bad taste in the mouth of everyone. Let me give an example. I am pre-tribulational/premillennial in my eschatology. It would be inappropriate for me to interview with a church and continue the discussion if I discovered that it was committed to an amillennial position. Now let me address our topic. If a person is strongly committed to 5-point Calvinism then he should be honest and transparent about that when talking to a church search committee. He should not hide behind statements like “I am a historic Baptist.” That statement basically says very little if anything and it is less than forthcoming. Be honest and completely so. If it is determined you are not a good fit for that congregation, rejoice in the sovereign providence of God and trust Him to place you in a ministry assignment that is a good fit. God will honor such integrity.
- 5) Teach the issues to your people, especially your youth. Sometimes pastors get frustrated when they send their students off to college and seminary and they come back different. Sometimes they go to a liberal institution and they return questioning or jettisoning the faith. Other times they go to a conservative school and return as double predestinarian, supralapsarian extreme Calvinists. They now question the public invitation and personal evangelism training, and redefine into insignificance the Great Commission. It has been my experience that this latter malady is more often caught from immature fellow students than from godly

professors. This observation is not intended to absolve our colleges and seminaries of their responsibility. It is to say, however, that we do our people no favors with a dumbed-down theology in the local church. We need to raise the biblical and theological bar in our churches, and we need to do so immediately. Should we inform our people of the great theological debates between Augustine and Pelagius, Luther/Calvin and Erasmus, Calvinists and Arminians? Yes. Do we need to acquaint them with the 5 points of Calvinism, the humanism of the Enlightenment, the destructive criticism of rationalism/antisupernaturalism and the Jesus seminar? Again the answer is yes. Some may protest that these issues will be over their heads. I would strongly disagree. If our schools can teach our children chemistry and biology, physics and geology, algebra and geometry, political science and economics, then we can certainly teach them theology and apologetics, Christians ethics and philosophy. We, as the local church, can prepare them in advance for what they will encounter so that various ideologies can be carefully critiqued, and extreme positions intelligently rejected for the errors they contain.

- 6) Recognize that our *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* is a well constructed canopy under which varying perspectives on this issue can peacefully and helpfully co-exist. Pelagians, Arminians and Open Theists will not find a home in our Southern Baptist family. We will love them while also disagreeing with them. Is there a place for differing positions on the issues of election, the extent of the atonement and calling, as well as how we do missions, evangelism and give the invitation? I am convinced that the answer is yes. Further, I believe we will be

the better for it theologically and practically as we engage each other in respectful and serious conversation. As one who considers himself to be a true compatibilist, affirming the majestic mystery of both divine sovereignty and human responsibility, I have been challenged and strengthened in my own theological understanding by those less reformed than I as well as those more reformed than I happen to be. Because of our passionate commitments to the glory of God, the Lordship of Christ, Biblical authority, salvation by grace through faith, and the Great Commission, we work in wonderful harmony with each other, and I suspect we always will.

Conclusion

The great Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon was a 5 point Calvinist. He was also a passionate evangelist and soul winner. On August 1, 1858 he preached a sermon entitled, "Sovereign Grace and Man's Responsibility." The words of wisdom that flowed from his mouth on that day could only come from a capable pastor-theologian with a shepherd's heart and a love for the lost. We would do well to heed the counsel of this Baptist hero upon whose shoulders we stand today.

"I see in one place, God presiding over all in providence; and yet I see and I cannot help seeing, that man acts as he pleases, and that God has left his actions to his own will, in a great measure. Now, if I were to declare that man was so free to act, that there was no precedence of God over his actions, I should be driven very near to Atheism; and if, on the other hand, I declare that God so overrules all things, as that man is not free enough to be responsible, I am driven at once into Antinomianism or fatalism. That God predestines, and that man is responsible, are two things that few can see. They are believed to be inconsistent and contradictory; but they are not. It is just the fault of our weak judgment. Two truths cannot be contradictory to each other. If, then, I find taught in one place that everything is fore-ordained, that is true; and if I find in another place that man is responsible for all his actions, that

is true; and it is my folly that leads me to imagine that two truths can ever contradict each other. These two truths, I do not believe, can ever be welded into one upon any human anvil, but one they shall be in eternity: they are two lines that are so nearly parallel, that the mind that shall pursue them farthest, will never discover that they converge; but they do converge, and they will meet somewhere in eternity, close to the throne of God, whence all truth doth spring. . . . You ask me to reconcile the two. I answer, they do not want any reconciliation; I never tried to reconcile them to myself, because I could never see a discrepancy. . . . Both are true; no two truths can be inconsistent with each other; and what you have to do is to believe them both”.

Here is a good place to stand. Here is a theology we can all affirm in service to our Savior.

Daniel L. Akin, President

Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

Wake Forest, North Carolina

