A NUANCED PERSPECTIVE OF PACKER'S *EVANGELISM AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD*

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by

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*I affirm the honor code.

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Summarizing Packer's Position

In his book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God,* J.I. Packer seeks to resolve an underlying conflict within perspectives on evangelism: the relationship between divine sovereignty and Christian's responsibility to evangelize. Sovereignty, in this discussion, is God's work of bringing undeserving sinners into His salvation. A common narrative is that if God is truly sovereign, there is no real need or urgency to evangelize; in order to evangelize, we must lay aside the idea that God is truly sovereign in bringing sinners to faith. He calls this "antimony," which is the appearance of two seemingly irreconcilable and equally logical ideas. His position is that divine sovereignty, far from undermining evangelism, actually sustains it. He maintains that Christians who attempt to reject or minimize God's sovereignty actually do believe in it, as evidenced by their prayers, thankfulness, and dependence on God's power to convert them and others. There is no contradiction between God's sovereign will in bringing unbelievers to belief in the gospel and man's efforts in sharing the gospel with those unbelievers.

Critiquing Packer's Position

I do not wish to make my entire critique about Packer's notion of divine sovereignty in terms of salvation. However, I will briefly mention it. Packer is right to point out the inherent Christian belief in God's sovereignty. Christians inherently believe that God is solely responsible—and therefore receives all the credit—for anyone receiving salvation through their

interaction with God in prayer. If they do not, it is difficult to see how that person is a true Christian. Sovereignty as a concept is necessarily Christian. Packer easily wins the debate between sovereignty and no sovereignty, in favor of sovereignty. However, Packer then addresses a debate on the *understanding* of sovereignty. He argues for a Calvinistic version of sovereignty over an Arminian version. This in itself is an insufficient bifurcation. There are, in fact, other versions of God's sovereignty that were not addressed. Packer lays out several propositions that he argues lead to a Calvinistic view: (1) depravity inhibits humans from turning to God naturally, (2) God must initiate salvation, (3) salvation only comes through the death and resurrection of Christ, (4) works cannot sustain our salvation after conversion, (5) there is nothing man can do to save himself, but we rely entirely on God's grace for salvation. Packer assumes that these (indeed true) propositions lead to Calvinism. Far from the case. Which of these propositions, or how do we deduce from all of these propositions, that God unilaterally selects certain people for salvation and damnation? Packer's argument is sufficient for a minimal understanding of sovereignty but insufficient for arriving at a Calvinistic view of sovereignty. We know from his brief excurses that sovereignty is true and a necessary component of our salvation, but we do not know that there is such a thing as irresistible grace or determinism. My most significant criticism of Packer is not that the evidence does not support his view, although that is the case, nor is his Calvinism my criticism, but that his view is not necessary for the purpose of the book itself. Rather than adopt either Calvinism or Arminianism, Packer should have simply argued from a basic understanding of sovereignty and bridged the gap with evangelism. His persistence on a Calvinistic view of divine sovereignty distracts the reader from the primary purpose.

My second criticism stems from his emphatic engagement with mystery and antinomy. As I mentioned, antinomy is a contradiction of two necessary truths in such a way that both cannot seemingly be affirmed at the same time. Packer argues that the sovereign will of God and human responsibility to evangelize constitute an antinomy we must accept and learn to live with. What he chooses to doubt is not the truth or systematic explanation of these concepts but human cognitive understanding as a whole. He says that we must "Refuse to regard the apparent inconsistency as real."[1] This antinomy is merely something that we cannot grasp in our finite minds. There are three problems with Packer's conclusion: (1) He more or less assumes that the sovereignty and responsibility function as an antimony rather than showing it to be the case, (2) he asks the reader to live in logical contradiction, and (3) he assumes humans are incapable of understanding the two concepts rather than offering nuanced views. Packer is far too quick to label the appearance of a contradiction as an irreconcilable mystery and to say that we must put our consciences and intelligence aside. Essentially, Packer asks us to be irrational. There is a difference between an inability to understand something exhaustively and living as though an irrational conclusion exists. Are we not designed as rational beings? Is God not the source of rationality? What is more likely, then, that the reality of divine sovereignty and human responsibility actually is irrational, or that our systematic explanations are inadequate and thus needing nuance?

My Position

Packer does a good job of explaining the temptations of exclusively focusing on either God's sovereignty or human responsibility. On the one hand, we can exalt ourselves in the

[1] J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Westmont, IL: IVP Books, 2012), 28.

process of converting others or even our own conversion; on the other hand, we can become mere spectators rather than participants in God's will to save. An overemphasis on human responsibility can create a dependence on man's efforts at the expense of God's necessary role, and an overemphasis on sovereignty can lose sight of man's responsibility to engage with the world. I also agree that there is a somewhat *apparent* contradiction between the concepts of God's sovereignty in salvation and man's responsibility to evangelize; however, I do not agree that this is an antinomy, nor do I agree that Christians should or must resort to living out logical absurdities.

Packer defines evangelism as presenting Jesus Christ to unbelievers in the power of the Holy Spirit with the purpose that they would accept Him as Savior, place their trust in God through Him, and serve Him as King forever.[2] The task of evangelists is to share the gospel with unbelievers, giving them the chance to receive salvation. Now compare this brief explanation of evangelism with Packer's fundamental propositions of divine sovereignty: *(1) depravity inhibits humans from turning to God naturally, (2) God must initiate salvation, (3) salvation only comes through the death and resurrection of Christ, (4) works cannot sustain our salvation after conversion, (5) there is nothing man can do to save himself, but we rely entirely on God's grace for salvation.* None of these propositions contradicts the explanation of evangelism. The second part of the fifth proposition is the only one that gives an appearance of a contradiction, or at least calls compatibility into question: "*we rely entirely on God's grace for salvation*." Aren't we also relying on evangelists to share the gospel with unbelievers in order to possibly receive salvation? Yes, but there is no contradiction if we understand that *the church's participation in evangelism*

[2] Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, 46.

is grace from God. We evangelize in the power of God, through His grace, for His salvific purposes, and to the glory of His name. Who brings salvation to unbelievers? God and God alone saves, but He uses evangelism to bring unbelievers into salvation. Does God depend on evangelists to successfully share the gospel with unbelievers? Absolutely not. It is only through God's grace that we can evangelize.[3]

The undergirding distinction between my position and Packer's position can now be made clear: Packer views human responsibility and divine sovereignty as mutually contradictory yet valid ideas because of his strict Calvinistic framework. From his perspective, these concepts cannot be reconciled because he rejects the second part of my explanation of the evangelistic task: *evangelism gives the unbeliever the chance to be saved*. According to his framework, God determines whether the unbeliever is actually saved, regardless of the evangelist's participation. If God wills that the unbeliever will be saved, then they will be saved. There is no possible world in which God actively wills that a person be saved and evangelists fail to share the gospel with that person, and therefore that person is not actually saved. Packer's Calvinist-induced antinomy is evident when he states that "Man is a responsible moral agent, though he is also divinely controlled; man is divinely controlled, though he is also a responsible moral agent. God's sovereignty is a reality, and man's responsibility is a reality too. This is the revealed antinomy in terms of which we have to do our thinking about evangelism."[4] This idea of divine control—hence, divinely determined human actions—is not developed in his book and is biblically unnecessary. In summary, Packer's framework leads him to conclude that evangelism and

[3] It is also worth noting that God can use other means other than evangelism to bring unbelievers to salvation. In fact, He is free to use dreams, visions, and other means to do so.

[4] [4] Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, 30.

sovereignty are irreconcilably contradictory, and that we must irrationally accept and live by them, whereas my non-Calvinistic framework harmonizes the role of evangelism with the presence of sovereignty. We can faithfully and rationally affirm both that God is the sole source of salvation and that man's responsibility does matter.

My Position Applied to Ministry

Evangelism matters because it offers unbelievers the opportunity to repent and be saved. If Christians fail to evangelize to a particular unbeliever, it does not therefore follow that the unbeliever is necessarily lost. For God could use other means. However, it is clear that the work of evangelists to obey the universal calling to share the gospel is significant. The sovereignty of God sustains evangelists and remains necessary for salvation. Evangelists have a role to play in God's sovereign plan to save sinners. Since evangelism matters not in spite of God's sovereignty but because of it, Christians should live with a sense of urgency and diligence in prayer. If you are saved, it is only through the grace of God; if an evangelist played a part in your conversion, it was only by the grace of God that your heart was willing to change and the evangelist was able to share. You are not saved *because of an evangelist* any more than Scripture penetrates my heart *because I speak English*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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