

X Marks The Spot

*³Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.
(Jude 1:3. ESV)*

¹⁷I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. (Romans 16:17. ESV)

¹But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine. (Titus 2:1. ESV)

Sovereignty And Responsibility

January 6th, 2013

Matthew 10:29

Ephesians 1:11

Romans 2:5-11

Acts 2:23

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

This morning we begin something absolutely different and yet intimately connected to what we have been doing for the last 52 weeks of Sundays. You see, when you read the Bible all the way through you discover the vastness of God and some seemingly irreconcilable truths in his person. You read one story and you leave that story convinced of the mercy of God. Then you read another story and God is sending fire and brimstone from heaven and consuming sinners by the tribe-load and you leave that story convinced of the justice of God. And then you find yourself wondering: “How do these things fit together?” “How can God be simultaneously just and merciful?” These tensions spill out from the vastness of God’s character into the arena of God’s interaction with humankind. We read a story in the Bible and we become convinced that God is Sovereign over all things. Then we read a story where people make real choices and are held accountable for those choices and we wonder: “How in the world do those realities hold together? How can God be Sovereign over all things and YET treat our decisions as if they are real and freely made?” Have you had any of those thoughts over the last 52 weeks? If you haven’t then you weren’t paying attention.

I’ve called this series “X Marks The Spot” because over the next 14 weeks I want to look specifically at these sorts of tensions in Holy Scripture. I want to take a closer look at the things

that at first glance appear to contradict each other or cancel each other out and to wrestle together with how we are to hold these various ideas in proper tension. The first tension I want to look at is perhaps the biggest and most vexing tension of all. I want to look at the seeming contradiction in Scripture between the Sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. Let's start first with the Scriptural witness to the Sovereignty of God.

The Sovereignty Of God

Here we need to be selective because there is a sense in which asserting the Sovereignty of God is one of the primary aims of the Bible and so we could read passages until the cows come home and not even scratch the surface. Let me show you three that address critical aspects of God's Sovereignty over all things. Let's look first at Matthew 10:29:

²⁹Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. (Matthew 10:29. ESV)

God's Sovereignty over all of nature is everywhere affirmed in Scripture. When God was pressing the point of his own Sovereignty over Job at the end of that book we have all of these statements from God about his Sovereignty over snowflakes and sandstorms and animals and plants and stars and seasons. God is Sovereign over creation.

God is also Sovereign over kings and political leaders, look at Proverbs 21:1:

¹ The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will. (Proverbs 21:1. ESV)

Again and again throughout the Bible God affects his plan over the world by means of manipulating the heart of kings. He hardens Pharaoh's heart to facilitate a display of his own glory in Exodus, he puts a hook in the jaw of the King of Assyria to point him towards Israel in Isaiah and in Ezra, in our reading from January 1st we read this:

¹In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, **the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia**, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom (Ezra 1:1. ESV)

That proclamation served to establish the return of the exiles and the rebuilding of the temple. God moved history towards his determined end by moving the heart of a human king. God is sovereign over creation and over kings. God is also sovereign over the experience of conversion, something we tend to find particularly vexing. Look at Ephesians 1:11:

¹¹In him we have obtained an inheritance, **having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will** (Ephesians 1:11. ESV)

Here the Apostle Paul says that within God's Sovereign working out of all things we can see his Sovereign predestination over the very issue of personal conversion. You are saved because God chose you. Before you chose him, he chose you. God's choice is sovereign and prior. Jesus taught that too. Look at John 6:44:

⁴⁴No one can come to me **unless the Father who sent me draws him**. And I will raise him up on the last day. (John 6:44. ESV)

The Greek word translated here as “draws him” is *helkuo* and it means literally “to drag”. It means to bind as with chords and to drag – it sounds more like a press gang than a conversion doesn't it? Back in the days of the British Empire the Navy in times of war was given extraordinary powers to conscript sailors. They were legally allowed to send out press gangs into neighbourhoods where ne'er-do-wells and loafers were known to hang out and the sailors would knock such a man on the back of the head, put him in a sack and carry him back to the ship where he was enlisted in the navy while still unconscious. He would wake up at sea and be offered the chance to serve in Her Majesty's Fleet or to swim home. John 6:44 sounds a lot like that as do many of the parables of Jesus about the kingdom. “Send out servants to the highways and by-ways and COMPEL THEM TO COME IN” – that sounds like a press gang to me and yet, as I reflect upon my own conversion it kind of fits. I look at my life and I see “that's where God knocked me on the back of the head, that's where he put me in a sack, that's where he enlisted me in the kingdom while I was unconscious in the sack and there is me waking up far out to sea.” It fits. And most truly saved people after 10 years or so of reflection talk about their own conversion in terms just like that. God is Sovereign over creation, over kings and over conversions.

However, there are tons of stories in the Bible, again too many to even scratch the surface that seem to affirm with equal strength and authority that human beings make real decisions for which they are held ultimately accountable. Let's take a look at some of those.

Human Responsibility

In Matthew 25 we have the story of the talents. You know this one I'm sure, the master is going away on a journey and he gives some investment money to several of his stewards and to one he gives 5 talents of gold, to another 2 and to another 1. He leaves and they each apply themselves to investment and industry, the master returns and they variously give their accounts. To the two stewards who worked hard and did well with what was entrusted to them the master says this:

'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' (Matthew 25:21. ESV)

To the one servant who had been lazy and stupid he says this:

'You wicked and slothful servant! ... you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents.... ³⁰And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' (Matthew 25:26-30. ESV)

In this story Jesus clearly teaches that human beings will be held accountable for what they do with what God gives them and that things like industry, effort, intelligence and obedience make a real difference in the extent to which we receive rewards or punishments from Almighty God. Human beings make choices and are held accountable for those choices, either negatively or positively.

Or consider Romans 2:5-11:

⁵But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

⁶**He will render to each one according to his works:** ⁷to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. ⁹There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. (Romans 2:5-11. ESV)

The Apostle Paul is absolutely clear that people make real choices and are held accountable for those choices. To those who choose to do evil there will be consequences and for those who choose to do right there will be consequences – good ones! Human beings do things – they are not puppets to the Sovereignty of God – they really do things and they are held accountable for what they really do.

The whole Bible seems to be making the case for God’s Sovereignty and for man’s responsibility, but the question we have really is how these things fit together; because the Bible presents them as though they do.

Exploring The Tension

The Bible speaks without apology, simultaneously affirming the Sovereignty of God and human responsibility – sometimes in the very same passage! Consider for example Acts 2:23:

²³this Jesus, delivered up **according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed** by the hands of lawless men. (Acts 2:23. ESV)

Peter says in the same verse: “The crucifixion of Jesus happened because God meant for it to happen. He predestined it. And yet YOU are responsible for it. You killed him and you will be judged accordingly.” How do those things go together? How can something happen because God predestined it and yet happen because of the sinful and morally responsible agency of human actors? If you’ve never asked that question you are either not a reader of the Bible or not HUMAN. Human minds react to antinomies. We are allergic to them. An antimony is something that looks to our eyes and seems to our minds to be a contradiction and yet it is not. They bother us. Antinomies do not just exist in theology they exist in science. We know for a fact that light consists of waves, much of modern physics is built upon that assumption and it is testable and provable. However, we also know and can demonstrate, test and prove that light exists as particle. Now according to everything we know about physics, nothing can be both particle and wave and yet, we can prove that light is both particle and wave. Thus we have an antimony. An antimony exists when a pair of principles stand side by side, seemingly contradictory, yet both undeniable¹. Because science is a progressive endeavour scientists simply

¹ As defined by Packer in “Evangelism and The Sovereignty of God”, page 26.

shrug their shoulders and assume that one day new discoveries will alleviate this apparent tension. To a certain extent, theologians are forced to do the same. As of right now, given how we live inside of space and time and given that we know only what the Bible tells us, we are not able to say how it is that God can be completely Sovereign in such a way that we continue to act as free and culpable moral agents – we simply know that the Bible states both with equal certainty and it never speculates on how this should be.

C.H. Spurgeon was once asked how he would try to reconcile these two facts and he replied by saying:

“I wouldn’t try. I never reconcile friends.”²

I’ve told you before that our Baptist grandparents did not try and reconcile these facts either, they simply drew a line around them. In the old Baptist Confession it says this:

God hath decreed in himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably, all things, whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin nor hath fellowship with any therein; nor is violence offered to the will of the creature, nor yet is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established; in which appears His wisdom in disposing all things, and power and faithfulness in accomplishing His decree. (The Baptist Confession, 1689. Section 3, paragraph 1)

These truths are like anchors and we sink them down in their respective places and we tie ourselves to these truths in faith. But when we attempt to reconcile these truths in our minds we find that the ropes don’t meet – we cannot tie a bow on these things in our minds and that drives us crazy. Rather we must simply hold them in tension and draw a line around them. X marks the spot. Orthodoxy is found right here in this place. If you let go of the one to embrace the other you become a heretic. Orthodox Christian faith affirms both simultaneously without claiming to understand how these things should be so.

To be a Christian, in the Biblical tradition is to affirm that God is Sovereign over all things. Everything DOES happen for a reason – God’s reason. We don’t use wimpy unbiblical language – we don’t say when bad things happen: “God didn’t want this to happen but he’ll find a way to bring some good out of it.” That is not true, that is not God. If God is Sovereign, what is the difference between “permit” and “decree”? No difference. If God is Sovereign over car

² Quoted by Packer in “Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God”, page 43.

accidents and you get in a car accident then there is no discernible difference between God permitting it and God decreeing it. If God is able to keep car accidents from happening and he chooses not to keep an accident from happening then he chose for the accident to happen. When a Sovereign all powerful God permits he thereby DECREES. So cut the wimpy language, it isn't true enough to be useful. To be a Bible believing Christian is to believe that everything that happens happens to serve God's purposes. All things work together for good. God's good. Our good as God's elect is wrapped up in the achieving of all of God's good purposes. To be a Christian is to believe that.

And yet to be a Christian is also to believe that people are truly and really responsible for their decisions. Otherwise, Christian preaching would not begin with the call to REPENT. All of the Gospel preaching in the Bible begins with the call to repent, which means "turn around", "come back", "retreat". All of that preaching would be nonsense if people did not have the moral responsibility for their direction in life. To become a Christian involves your wilful decision to stop, acknowledge your direction in life as rebellious and sinful and hurtful to God and others and to wilfully turn from that towards worship of God. To be a Christian then is to live between these seemingly irreconcilable truths. As soon as you step out of this little circle, you are not an orthodox Bible believing Christian.

So this is certainly the orthodox position, this circle around the space where sovereignty and responsibility almost touch is the space of orthodox Biblical Christianity. Being orthodox is fine and good but more than being the place of orthodoxy, it is the place of comfort, confidence and peace. Let me end our time this morning by walking you through a few of the more important advantages of this theology and a couple of its more complicated applications.

The Advantages Of Sovereignty

Our Puritan and Reformed grandparents actually reflected at great length upon the advantages associated with believing in a Sovereign God and I will not try and improve upon their work. In the Heidelberg Catechism questions 26-28 attempt to tease this out. They wanted children to be aware of three advantages in particular.

1. Patience in adversity

When bad things happen to us we are not supposed to panic, we are not supposed to doubt the goodness of God, or the power of God or the plan of God. Nothing has changed. God must be using this difficulty to purify our faith. That after all is one of the overriding purposes of God with respect to humanity – to prepare us for judgment day. If we lose all our money in a stock market crash, it doesn't mean that God is not in charge. Perhaps God is seeking to wean us off our addiction to material goods. Perhaps he is reminding us where true value lies. Perhaps he is rebuking our tendency to receive from money things we are meant to receive only from him. Regardless, God has some specific and good purpose in mind. Therefore, endure, reflect, learn and wait for the removal of the trial. It will likely end the very moment its purpose has been achieved in your heart.

2. Thankfulness in prosperity

The Heidelberg Catechism was written long before the distortions of the prosperity Gospel and I'm glad it was because had it not been I doubt they would have had the courage to remind us that one of the advantages of believing in God's Sovereignty is that we can be thankful in prosperity. Our Reformed fore-fathers wanted us to know that if you are wealthy it is because God wanted you to be wealthy. I'm not sure I would have the courage to say that today because I would be worried that the corruptions of the prosperity gospel would keep you from hearing that correctly. This is one of the benefits of reading old books. Fear of contemporary heresy sometimes makes us hesitant to say things that still need to be said. If you are rich God wanted you to be rich. Thank him for your riches. He chose for you to be born into the family business you now profit from. Or, if you are a more recently wealthy person, he gave you the skills that you used to acquire your new found wealth. Thank him for that. Now, the question of course is why did God want you to be rich. The answer the Apostle Paul gives in Galatians 6 is so that you can do good – especially to the household of faith. God gave you that money – thank him for it and then use it for the purposes he intended.

3. Steadfastness in faith

The third advantage of believing in God's sovereignty, according to answer 28 in the Heidelberg Catechism is the development of steadfastness in faith among true believers. One of the

characteristics of true, Bible believing, Holy Spirit filled Christians should be steadfastness in faith. They should not be tossed about by the ups and downs of life. They should persevere until the end. If God called you, if God saved you, then you should persevere because God does all things well. Now we will return to this issue of the perseverance of the saints on another Sunday but for now, you should know that the greatest comfort to be found in the doctrine of God's Sovereignty with respect to your conversion is that if God did it, it will stay done. You will persevere.

Advantages of Human Responsibility

In terms of the advantages of believing in human responsibility, let me mention just one, though I will speak of it in two parts. The primary advantage in believing in human responsibility is the maintenance of some primary factors of human motivation, namely fear and ambition. You see if we let go of this doctrine in order to give ourselves fully and exclusively to the doctrine of Divine Sovereignty what exactly would motivate us to get out of bed in the morning? If God has decreed it then it will come to pass whether I get out of bed or not. But. We aren't allowed to let go and let God. That saying is galactically stupid and altogether heretical. The two primary human motivators are fear and ambition and they are both preserved in orthodox Christian theology.

1. Fear

One of the primary reasons that I adopted reasonably moral behaviour as a young person was my father's tendency to take off his leather belt and apply it to our leather backsides in response to poor behaviour. In truth I only remember receiving the belt one time. It was sufficient. If you were not raised in the 70's then you likely have no idea how much more painful a leather belt from your father is compared to a wooden spoon from your mother. I had learned to fake the experience of pain with my mother – she is a woman and responds to the appearance of pain in her children. I exploited that mercilessly. One or two taps of the spoon and I was balling and wailing like a little girl. She felt terrible and ashamed and she relented and I went on sinning. And then one day I crossed some sort of line and I was condemned to a meeting in the bathroom with my father and his belt and that experience changed my life and never had to be repeated. Morality began to appeal to me in a way it never had before. Fear is a primary human motivator.

There is nothing wrong with that. I drive the speed limit because of fear. Fear that I'll get a ticket from the police and fear that I will drive my car into a ditch and kill my children. Fear is good and the Bible says that if I reject God's mercy in Jesus Christ I will go to hell. Period. Further it says that in hell I will be punished precisely in accordance with my sins. I know about many of my sins and therefore I am afraid. That is good. That is an advantage that is preserved in the orthodox Christian faith.

2. Ambition

Many Christians today believe neither in hell nor in reward. Perhaps that explains their utter uselessness with regards to the Great Commission. The Apostle Paul believed in both. He believed that some saved people would far exceed other saved people in terms of eternal reward:

¹²Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—¹³each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:12-14. ESV)

Paul said that some people due to their own laziness and stupidity would be as naked men in heaven. They would be saved but only as a man escaping from a fire. They would have no rewards in heaven because they never did anything of eternal value. He had no problem saying that he was highly motivated to accumulate eternal rewards. Listen my friends, we are human beings. We get out of bed in the morning because of fear and ambition. The Bible doesn't condemn either, it just says that there are good things to fear – like your father's belt and the fires of hell and there are bad things to fear like the opinion of men and the experience of temporary persecutions. The Bible doesn't condemn ambition either it just says that we are not to be ambitious for earthly wealth but rather heavenly wealth. Ambition is good and fear is good and both are preserved as appropriate human motivations in orthodox Christian theology.

Let me conclude our time by making very brief reference to two areas of complicated application. First of all let me address how this belief applies to the matter of Evangelism.

Applied To Evangelism

If God is Sovereign over conversion – if he bonks us on the head and sticks us in a sack and enlists us in the kingdom – dragging us into salvation as it were, then why do we bother to present the Gospel to people? Either God will go get them or he won't. Either people are predestined and awakened by the Sovereign work of God or they are not. Yes BUT. That is to hold onto the Sovereignty of God without holding on to the equally affirmed truths about human responsibility. The Bible also says:

¹⁷The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price. (Revelation 22:17. ESV)

In the Bible people are invited and morally responsible for accepting or rejecting the call to convert. The Spirit is involved in extending this invitation and so is the church, the Bride of Christ. We say "Come" and we're not kidding.

Let me outline the other area of complicated application before trying to bring a measure of clarity that serves equally well in both categories. Let's talk about sovereignty and responsibility applied to the topic of prayer.

Applied To Prayer

Does prayer change things? If God is going to do all his holy will than what difference does it make if we pray? Have you ever wondered about that? And yet God tells us to pray and he seems to react to those prayers as if they really work. In Exodus 32 when the people of Israel sinned God told Moses that he was so angry at their sin that he was going to destroy them and build up the house of Israel through the line of Moses only, but Moses fell on his face and prayed saying:

Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. ¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self (Exodus 32:12-13. ESV)

And God relented. How can that be, our minds scream. How can God turn back from a stated purpose? How can prayer actually MOVE the God of the Universe without in some way denying his Sovereignty over all things? Likewise we ask: "How can fervour and industry in Evangelism actually result in harvest and conversion without impinging upon the Sovereign election of

Almighty God?” Those are big questions. The answer in the Bible seems to be that a Sovereign God decrees both the end AND the means that best serve the advancement of his own glory. The means is usually and general human agency. Prayer and Gospel preaching. God decreed that things would happen in such a way as to confound the wisdom of the wise and highlight the graciousness of grace. He decreed that a person would be saved to God’s own glory AND he decreed that he would be saved in response to the prayers of an iddy bitty grandmother who lifted that rebellious young man up to the throne of grace every day, without fail for 35 long years. He decreed the end and the means. He decreed that he would hear the Gospel through the Word of God preached. Paul said that:

And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ¹⁵And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” ¹⁶But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” ¹⁷So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:14-17. ESV)

God has decreed the ends AND the means by which the ends are achieved. He has willed to achieve his will through the agency of prayer and Gospel preaching. Your prayers and Gospel preaching DO really accomplish the ends that God has decreed. God is Sovereign and we are responsible. As our grandparents once said this is the manifold wisdom of God and this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.