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## How Can I Accept the Sovereignty of God?

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### Introduction

Since the Reformation, the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility has attracted a great attention and debate among evangelicals.<sup>3</sup> The debate has often been between *monergists* (adherents of the pro-Reformers' view) and *synergists* (those of the anti-Reformers' view).<sup>4</sup> *Monergists* proclaim a God-glorifying *monergism* (where Calvinists say God's grace alone raises the dead and rebellious sinners to spiritual life without the cooperation of man). Whilst the *synergists* proclaim *synergism* (where Calvinists say that God's grace without the assistance and cooperation

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<sup>1</sup> He is a minister with the Church of England.

<sup>2</sup> See Peter Hardy, *Being Human—Fulfilling Genetic and Spiritual Potential* (London, D.L.T. 2003), 77-93.

<sup>3</sup> The word evangelical comes from the Greek *euangelion* and the Latin *evangelion*, to mean 'good news', the old term for which is gospel. Evangelical refers to Churches or movements which regard as the hallmark of Christianity the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, personal conversion experiences, the Bible as the sole basis of faith and an active programme of evangelism for winning people to Christ. See Kenneth Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals in the Church of England 1734-1984*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther and John Calvin were leaders of the Reformation, but while Martin Luther and his disciples became known as 'evangelical,' John Calvin and his followers preferred to call themselves as 'Reformed.'

of man is incapable of accomplishing salvation). The challenge is that both *monergists* and *synergists* are telling us what God is doing for man's salvation. But none is telling us what man needs to do to benefit from that salvation. That is the point of our inquiry below.

I believe that salvation is not only a matter of knowing what God is doing, has done, and will do. It is also about knowing what human beings are doing with God's resource of salvation for their past, present and future. Let's try to examine those two sides of the coin about man's salvation.

### **1. Who am I?**

I am an Anglican Evangelical. I believe firmly in God's absolute sovereignty over all things, including man's spiritual deadness in and bondage to sin, and above all our inability to come to God because without faith we cannot please him (Heb 11:6). I believe it is our duty to 'Continue to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in 'us' to will and to act according to his good purpose' (Phil 2:12-13).

So I am neither a *monergist* nor a *synergist*, especially of the *Calvinist kind*. Here are three reasons why I am not a *monergist*:

First, with due respect to many devout Christian believers, I do not subscribe to the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election. Why? Because theologically speaking, it is based on the unscriptural *Calvinistically programmed /defined* conceptions of the doctrines of sovereignty and predestination.

Second, I accept the fact that God is sovereign and has predestined all that was, is, or will be to God's own glory, (Eph 1:11-14) minus all the *Calvinistically designed theological perceptions and hermeneutics*.

Third, Scripture teaches that God sovereignly ordained that faith in Christ be a real condition of salvation and not (as Calvinists teach) a mere consequence of election. (16:31).

Calvinists perceive the monergist essentially as:

1. Making God both the object of faith and the subject of faith,
2. Making God both the giver of the gift of new and eternal life and the one who accepts that gift on behalf of the recipient.

In *monergistic* perception of salvation human beings have no role to play. It is only God who plays roles as object and subject of faith, and as giver and receiver of the gifts of salvation.

To Calvinists if you receive (preregeneration) the gift of eternal life, you thereby become the giver or co giver of that gift. As Calvinists see it, there can only be one will involved in the saving of a human being. If you make a choice to be saved (ie, you must believe as a condition of salvation), then you are, according to Calvinism, helping to regenerate yourself, and paying part of the price of redemption. What makes a theological conviction or commitment monergistic, however, is not about how many wills are involved in the saving of a person but how many saviours actually save the person. If a man (along with God) was able to (or did) accomplish something of a saving, redemptive, or atoning nature, that would constitute synergism. In reality no man is able to do a real saving work.

This leads me to my next spiritual identity, explaining why I am not a *synergist*.

Although this is conditional *synergism* there is still fear of the *synergist* making God dependant on people. If this happened God will not be God since he will be unable to do anything he wants to do unless and until people grant him their will. But receiving is not giving.

Let's suppose I worked extremely hard and managed to buy a home in the UK for my mother Gertrude who lives in Uganda. Having earned enough money, and bought the home, I would invite my mother from Uganda to fly over and live in her new home in the UK. All that Gertrude would need to do is to accept her son's free gift by taking up ownership of her home and then begin to enjoy living there as a home owner in the UK. It would be illogical for anyone who comments on this exchange of gift between a son and mother to say that in accepting the house Gertrude became a co-worker or co-buyer of the home with John her son. This would simply be ridiculous because until I worked hard enough to get enough money to buy the home Gertrude was not in possession of the kind of British pounds it takes to buy a home in the UK. She never had the money, she still does not have it, and she will never earn enough money on her account to afford buying a home in the UK.

The giving and receiving physical dynamic illustrated in the example above is similar to the giving and receiving spiritual dynamic which ought to go on in a personal relationship between God the Father and individual Christians. According to John 3:16, God loved the world so much that he gave us the gift of his Son Jesus Christ so that all who believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life. In taking our sin upon himself, so that Jesus who was sinless had to die on the cross for our forgiveness, God the Father was buying for us a heavenly home which no human being would have had the price to pay for. After Jesus had completed the purchase through his death and resurrection, he invited those who would believe in him to become sons and daughters of his heavenly Father. Faith is the key to being united with Christ and the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit for eternity. By confessing faith in Christ, the believer like God's temple becomes indwelt by God's presence in the Spirit, s/he embodies God's Word, and transforms into Christlikeness matching daily the journey of bearing the fruit of the spirit, and of living as salt and light, all in preparation for being made fit for enjoying eternity with God the Wise, Immortal and the End.

Calvinists do not see faith as a condition for salvation as illustrated above. They reduce it to a mere consequence of election, irresistible grace, and regeneration.<sup>5</sup> In doing so they give theological lip service to the place and importance of faith, because they say that if you are among a transitional class of people called the elect, you will believe and cannot do otherwise, because you irresistibly will be drawn to God and regenerated, at which time you will be made a believer. If a person is not among that class, it is just too bad for that person. But this really is not the message and meaning of John 3: 16. Rather, the contrary is true that God's love extends beyond the limits of race, nation or class to include those or (all) who oppose Jesus, namely the world. Jesus came to save not condemn (John 3:17) men and women who habitually embrace darkness (John 3:19-21).

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<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, iii, xxi, section 5, p. 206.

## 2. The Sovereignty of God in the Bible

The sovereignty of God is a defined exercise of His supremacy.<sup>6</sup> Here the sovereignty of God is not an abstract or impersonal force but that of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who reigns in the Lord who is the Spirit. Jesus himself is at the heart of the sovereignty because he and the Father are one. The Father is sovereign and extends his sovereignty in the Son. The Son is sovereign and sustains the work he started to do on earth in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is sovereign as the love that binds the God-head so there cannot be in the sovereignty of God any un-Christlikeness at all.<sup>7</sup>

The Bible traces all divine activity in the universe back to God's sovereignty. The biblical idea of God's sovereignty includes divine and human sets of roles working in mutual correspondence. Sovereignty is best reflected in divine kingship. Divine kingship translates into at least six royal practices:

1. Ownership. YHWH rendered the Lord and commonly (adon) and the two Greek words, Kyrios and despotes all imply ownership. All things are God's- the earth, the heavens, the silver, the gold, Israel his chosen servant, the pagan peoples, their kings like Cyrus and Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and not least the Christians themselves.
2. Authority. God had absolute authority in heaven and on earth. It is by authority that the rain falls on the just and the unjust. (Matt 5:45). A false prophet could give a prophecy that led people astray only with the Lord's permission or directions. Such prophets are responsible to God (Ezek 14).
3. Epithets of power. God is referred to by a number of epithets which reflect his attributes or are associated with particular events in the history of Israel. For example, el sadday (Gen 17:1), this is given as pantocrator in (Revelation 1:8) and is usually translated in English as God Almighty. God Almighty

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<sup>6</sup> See [www.Theopedia.com/Talk:Sovereignty\\_of\\_God](http://www.Theopedia.com/Talk:Sovereignty_of_God).

<sup>7</sup> This *theologization* is adapted from the theology that 'The heart of Christian doctrine is not only that Jesus is divine, but that God is Christ like.' See Arthur Michael Ramsey, *God Christ and the World; A Study in Contemporary Theology* (London: SCM 1969), 37

emphasizes God's supreme power and total sovereignty over all creation.

4. Majestic anthropomorphisms. Much anthropomorphism describes God's majesty. Among these are God as bridegroom (Isai 61:10); father (Deut 32:6); king (Isai 33:22); shepherd (Ps 23:1); physician (Ex 15:26). Sometimes parts of the body and human action are attributed to God for the same purpose of displaying his sovereignty. God is said to have a face (Ex 33:20; Rev (22:4); eyes (Ps 11:4; Heb 4:13); ears (Ps 55:1); a nose (Deut 33:10); a mouth (Deut 8:3); hands (Num 11:23); and a heart (Gen 6:6). God is knowing (Gen 18:21), seeing (Gen 1:10); hearing (2;24); smelling (Gen 8:21); tasting (Ps 11:5); sitting (Ps 9:7); walking (Lev 26:12), not to mention the many miracles which begin with incarnation, and the miracles dotted throughout the ministry of Jesus Christ, culminating in his death, resurrection, ascension and Pentecost.
5. Incommunicable attributes. A number of attributes which God can not share with human beings are used to describe him to project his sovereignty. Although these words do not occur in the Bible, yet these attributes of God are clearly referred to- invisibility, immutability, impassibility or inability to suffer in spite of the fact that Jesus Christ suffers and dies on the cross.
6. Communicable attributes. One of the most communicable attributes God shares with people and which reflects his sovereignty is holiness. God is never responsible for our sin. Sin is our responsibility because it comes from our sinful desires. God warns the prophets who give false messages, (2 Thes 2:11). Without God restraining them from their sin, they would naturally choose lies instead of the truth and worship creation in place of the Creator (Rom 1: 18-25). God simply gave them permission to enact their sinful desires. The remarkable fact is not that God allows some sinners to persist in their chosen delusions, but that he saves sinners, changes our natures, and gives us the desires to do good for the glory of God (Ezek 36:25-26; Rom 8:1-11; Eph 2:10). Jesus prayed for his disciples to his Father to 'make them holy by your name.' (John 17:17) And Christians should bear the gifts of the Holy

Spirit (Gal 5:22-23), but whether one actually does is a matter of being willing to experience and accept the sovereignty of God.

### 3. How Can I Accept the Sovereignty of God?

Of the five letters in the acrostic for Reformed Theology summarised in the word *TULIP* only the first and last refer to the human condition while others centre on the divine conditionality.<sup>8</sup>

- T** = Total Depravity
- U** = Unconditional Election
- L** = Limited Atonement
- I** = Irresistible grace
- P** = Perseverance of the Saints

So *TULIP* cannot help us find the appropriate human response to our question.

You believe in Jesus Christ, confess with your lips that he is your Lord, and trust in your heart that he died to save you and you are saved because God who begins this work of faith in your heart fills you with his spirit of confidence until you are fully certain of being his child (Rom 10:9-10; Eph 5:18). Jesus commanded us to put aside our doubts and to take the risk to believe in God and in him. (John 14:1-4). ‘Faith is to believe what you don’t see; and the reward of faith is to see what you believe’ (Augustine).<sup>9</sup>

You hunger for God’s word, learn to read and practice the Bible in prayer, fellowship, worship, service, ministry, evangelism, every member ministry, etc making God’s Word a lamp to your feet and a light to your path (Psalm 119:105).

Sovereign God requires personal faith in Christ as the condition for salvation (Acts 16:31; Rom 10: 9-10). In each of man’s fourfold states Augustine outlined, faith is the missing link in the chain between a believer and Christ that makes salvation a daily possibility and reality. These states were as follow.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Chosen By God* (Illinois, Tyndale House Publishers 1986), 103

<sup>9</sup> See J. John, *Soul Purpose—Living the life that God lives* (Milton Keynes: Authentic 2008), 5

<sup>10</sup> See Thomas Boston, *Human Nature and Its Fourfold State*, 1720, (Banner of Truth 1964).

1. **Libertas Adami** - freedom of Adam; before the fall - this is the ability or power not to sin, able to sin, and able not to sin (*posse peccare, posse non peccare*).
2. **Libertas peccatorum** - freedom of sinners; after the fall- this is the power of being not able not to sin (*non posse non peccare*). This is the evidence to why the man-glorifying *monergism* is a self-lie of post-modernity.
3. **Libertas fidelium** - freedom of the faithful; after believing in Christ- this is the power of being able not to sin (*posse non peccare*).
4. **Libertas gloriae** - freedom of glory; after glorification- this is the state of being totally and finally absolutely unable to sin (*non posse peccare*).<sup>11</sup>

The history of Evangelicalism in the Church of England is littered with the men and women who ventured to respond to the divine offer of salvation by accepting Christ by faith and who God changed by his grace and used to change the world.

Some of the leading figures whose witness left a mark on Evangelicalism in the Church of England and on world-wide history include:

**William Wilberforce** (1759-1833), philanthropist and advocate of the abolition of the slave trade.

**Charles Simeon** (1759-1836), whose preaching and pastoral ministry at Cambridge impacted many undergraduates. He was so unique because he held together both Calvinist and Arminian tendencies in his thought.

**Henry Venn** (1759-1813), who founded and became General Secretary of the Church Missionary Society which sent founding missionaries to India and Africa.

**Bishop J. C. Ryle** (1816-1900) who in wrote that a ‘leading feature of Evangelical religion is the high place which is assigned to the Holy Spirit in the heart of man...there can be

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://gypsycholarship.blogspot.com/2009/02/divine-sovereignty-and-human-freedom.html>.

no real conversion to God, no new creation in Christ, no new birth of the spirit, where there is nothing felt within.’<sup>12</sup>

A leading Anglican Evangelical, who has impacted many people for Christ through speaking at University Christian missions, Christian conferences especially Keswick, and Christian publications, locally in the UK and worldwide, is John Stott (b.1921).

### Conclusion

The sovereignty of God has the salvation of Jesus Christ at its centre. So to accept the sovereignty is synonymous with believing in Christ and the gospel. Thus knowledge of God and his sovereignty cannot be separated from knowledge of Jesus and the gospel. In the Bible God saves when he moves among his people. The discussion here has revealed that when God moves the people also move. So the challenge in pondering the question: ‘How can I accept the sovereignty of God?’ is not only about understanding God’s initiative, it is also about understanding man’s response. In monergism not only does God’s grace alone raise the dead and rebellious sinners to spiritual life without the cooperation of men, but the dead and the sinners who are finally saved actually play a responding role to God’s sovereignty. It seems that the most important question that was ever addressed to the sovereignty of God was asked by the jailer of Paul and Silas: ‘What must I do to be saved?’ To this came the best answer ever: ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved’ (Acts 16:31) Yes, divine initiative and human response go together as sovereign and sovereignty do.



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<sup>12</sup> See Quotation by Mark Chapman, *Anglicanism—A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: University Press, 2006), 59