

God's Sovereignty & Human Responsibility in Biblical Tension

Romans 11:33 (NKJV) Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!

Calvinism (emphasizing God's sovereignty) and Arminianism (emphasizing human responsibility) have been in conflict for centuries. I certainly want to underscore the importance of a GOD-CENTERED theology but I also want to underscore the importance of a BIBLICALLY-BALANCED theology. The fact is the Bible holds both God's sovereignty and human responsibility in biblical tension in such a way we cannot completely figure it out. That, in a nutshell, is my position.

There is much "baggage" with both systems of Calvinism and Arminianism. There are all kinds of variations and degrees of emphasis. One man calls himself a "moderate Calvinist" and another more hard-core Calvinist may say that he is an "Arminian". Which is it? In this word game, "he who defines the terms wins the argument". So, both might be right (or wrong) depending on who defines the terms. Therefore, if I had to have a label, I would prefer it to be "Biblicist". I want to follow the BIBLE wherever an INDUCTIVE study takes me. In this discussion, it leads me to BIBLICAL TENSIONS that are past finding out.

Caveat: In interacting with various sources on this subject, it does not mean I am giving a blanket endorsement of the source. It simply means they are making a point I think worthy of thoughtful consideration in the context of the discussion.

Calvinism, in general, is often defined in terms of the TULIP acrostic and Arminianism is essentially seen to be the antithesis of these points. Of course, there are varying shades of emphasis regarding all five points on both sides, but in general, I note the contrasting positions below.

Calvinism

Total Depravity = total inability

Unconditional Election

Limited Atonement (Jesus died only for the elect)

Irresistible Grace

Perseverance of the Saints

Arminianism

Ability to respond non-meritoriously

Election Conditioned on Foreknown Faith
Unlimited Atonement (Jesus died for all)
Grace is resistible
Saints may revert to aint's

“When a Calvinist says that all things happen according to the predestination of God, he speaks the truth, and I am willing to be called a Calvinist. But when an Arminian says that when a man sins, the sin is his own, and that if he continues in sin, and perishes, his eternal damnation will lie entirely at his own door, I believe that he speaks the truth, though I am not willing to be called an Arminian. **The fact is, there is some truth in both these systems of theology.**” (Charles Spurgeon - quoted in Credenda Agenda, Volume 5 Number 2, p. 3, from Tom Carter, Spurgeon at His Best, Baker, 1988, p. 14 – **emphasis mine**)

“God chose certain individuals to salvation, but they freely choose Christ. Both are equally present in the salvation dynamic. To diminish God’s sovereign choice is to go against the teaching of Scripture; likewise, to diminish human responsibility is to deny the teaching of Scripture. The relationship between the two is likened to a railroad track. The two parts of the track are perfectly parallel. You need both parts to make a track; one without the other makes travel on the track impossible. When a person stands on the track and looks into the future, they seem to come together. But as long as a person walks the tracks, they remain parallel. So it is with the interplay between divine sovereignty of choice in salvation and the matter of human responsibility in salvation. Both are equally taught in Scripture. As long as we remain in this world, in our finiteness we cannot reconcile this seeming antinomy. In fact, all attempts to reconcile the two have been unsuccessful. Both the reality of divine sovereignty in God’s choice of those who will be saved and the truth of human responsibility must be held in theological tension.” -**Dr. James P. Eckman** (From an unpublished paper “The Theological Tension of Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility”, p. 4 – used by permission.)

“Eternity **shall** be at **once** a **great eye-opener** and a **great mouth-shutter.**” -**Jim Elliot**